



Legitimising capital: parent organisations and their resistance to testing in England

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Abstract

This paper presents findings from a year-long network ethnography into the strategies, networks, and outcomes of More Than a Score (MTAS)—a campaign against standardised testing in UK primary schools. Focusing specifically on the parent-based groups of the organisation, we use theorisations of symbolic capital to challenge traditional understandings of how capital can be leveraged for group advancement. We argue that MTAS frames itself as a grassroots organisation, using this image to promote its agenda amongst possible allies. Parent groups serve a critical role in accentuating the ‘grassroots’ image, as they bring a level of credibility to this claim. At the same time, the individuals who run these groups also bring technical skills, professional experiences, and connections that provide logistical and expert capital to the range of MTAS’s strategies and agendas. In doing so, their political and social capital as ‘parents’ provide a sort of legitimising capital to MTAS.

Keywords More than a Score · Resistance · Capital · Legitimacy capital · Network ethnography

1 Introduction

Standardised testing has become a ubiquitous part of schooling across most countries in the twenty-first century (Lingard et al., 2013; Verger et al., 2019). At the same time, various stakeholders, including scholars, practitioners, parents, and politicians continue to debate the merits, purposes, and utility of testing. Some actors have grown increasingly sceptical of how tests are being used, leading various groups to mobilise around a desire to resist such trends in education (Campos Martinez et al., 2022). In the US, for example, a group of New York-based parents

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initiated the opt-out movement, which has grown in number and force over the past several years (see Chen et al., 2021; Hursh et al., 2020; Pizmony-Levy et al., 2021; Wang, 2021). In Chile, students and teachers have banded together to resist high-stakes testing and other forms of neoliberal control of the education sector (Montero et al., 2018; Sisto et al., 2022). In the UK, organisations such as Rethinking Assessment, the Independent Commission on Assessment in Primary Education (ICAPE), and the More Than a Score (MTAS) campaign have organised around the effort to reduce the testing of early years students. It is with this last organisation that we have focused our year-long network ethnography, which serves as the basis of this paper.

While our broader project encompasses multiple dimensions and aspects of MTAS, we use this paper to look at one of the key actor groups of the network—the parents. The MTAS organisation is made up of multiple actor groups, but the parents occupy a particularly significant role in helping the network accomplish its primary goals. Given the complexity of MTAS, as well as our ongoing analyses to make sense of it, we saw a need to look specifically at the role of parents to capture the extent to which they are involved within MTAS—in both material and symbolic ways. To this end, we use this paper to illustrate how the parents are positioned and employed to shape the message, identity, and objectives of MTAS. In material ways, we argue that parents were fundamentally involved in the initial formation of MTAS, and they continue to be a part of ongoing efforts to fulfill the objectives of the organisation. Simultaneously, the symbolic image of the ‘parent’ is also a fundamental characteristic of the movement’s identity, as it helps the organisation maintain its legitimacy as a ‘grass-roots’ organisation. To develop this argument, we draw on various theorisations of social capital (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992; Coleman, 1988; Sandefur & Laumann, 1998), while challenging traditional understandings of how capital can be leveraged for group advancement.

The paper is organised in the following ways: first, we provide a background to the current testing environment. We start with a broad view of test-based accountability in the context of the UK. Then, we articulate our use of network ethnography and how we managed the effects of COVID-19 on our ability to access MTAS events. We follow with our analysis of the parent organisations—presenting each group individually at first, but then developing the concept of ‘legitimising capital’ for making sense of the dual roles that the parent organisations occupy within the broader campaign. We conclude with a discussion about how this work can extend our understanding of resistance, especially when resistance is formed in more horizontal (as opposed to bottom-up) ways.

2 Test-based accountability in England

The high-stakes accountability system in England is the result of a complex articulation of standardised assessments, end of secondary high-stakes examination (GCSEs), and a consequential inspection system that combine public display of performance data via rating systems and league tables. On the one hand, the Office for Standards in Education, Children’s Services and Skills (Ofsted) is responsible

for state-funded schools' inspections in England. Unlike other countries where there is no external inspection (Finland), or the emphasis is on improvement through self-evaluation (Ireland, Singapore), inspection in England plays a key part in the accountability framework, with emphasis on external inspection and a short notice period. Ofsted inspections will result in a school being placed into a banded category, ranging between outstanding, good, requires improvement, and inadequate, with serious consequences for schools on the lowest band which face mandatory academy conversion and high-frequency inspections.

All key stages are subject to intense testing and monitoring. In reception (age 4), the government has recently introduced the reception baseline assessment (RBA), aimed at making 'end-to-end' school-level progress measures possible, producing 'simple', un-contextualised data. The purpose of the reception baseline assessment is to 'provide an on-entry assessment of pupil attainment to be used as a starting point from which a cohort-level progress measure to the end of key stage 2 (KS2) can be created' (Standards & Testing Agency, 2019, p.4). In primary, Standard Assessment Tests (SATs) in English and maths are administered to children in Year 2 and Year 6 to monitor their educational progress, and schools' effectiveness is determined on the basis of these scores which are publicly available. Finally, the main assessment for KS4 is a tiered exit qualification known as General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSEs), which determine school and college sixth form options (A levels) and subsequent eligibility for university courses. A recent report by the DfE (Department for Education) (2017) argues that 'the high stakes system can negatively impact teaching and learning, leading to narrowing of the curriculum and "teaching to the test", as well as affecting teacher and pupil wellbeing'. The NUT report titled 'Exam Factories? The impact of accountability measures on children and young people' (2015) highlights that school strategies in relation to accountability have resulted in additional work for teachers, making them tired and stressed. These strategies include (i) the use of teacher appraisal to set targets related to improving pupils' attainment (linked to performance-related pay in many schools), (ii) explicit targets/outcomes for every lesson/activity, and (iii) mock Ofsted inspections.

There are also more specific strategies related to the production, scrutiny, and use of data to target teaching such as detailed and frequent data gathering and scrutiny of pupils' progress, use of data to target individual pupils, and regular preparation for national tests. In this context, Bradbury & Roberts-Holmes (2017) refer to the increased prominence and visibility of data in schools as 'datafication', drawing attention to the velocity and volume of data-based demands on teachers. Indeed, they claim data collection has a significant impact on the classroom, driving pedagogy and dominating workloads. Data itself have 'come to partly represent the teacher's pedagogical focus and a means by which to measure their competence and ability' (Roberts-Holmes, 2015, p. 307), and teacher's pedagogy has 'increasingly narrowed to ensuring that children succeed within specific testing regimes which interpret literacy and numeracy in very particular ways' (p. 303).

Similar to other national contexts, groups of parents, students, and other concerned citizens have begun pushing back against such intensified

testing environments. There is a growing literature regarding these efforts, which we describe below.

3 Parent-led resistance to test-based accountability

Though context-specific, there has been an increasingly global movement against the effects of test-based accountability around the world (see Campos Martinez et al., 2022). These efforts have involved many different actors, including students, parents, and teachers. For example, university students and teachers have built coalitions in Chile (e.g. Montero et al., 2018; Sisto et al., 2022), while school parents have led large opt-out movements across the United States (e.g. in New York City). Of particular relevance to this study is the growing research on the involvement of parents in these movements. In New York, where some of the most visible parent-led resistance has been documented (Hursh et al., 2020; Pizmony-Levy & Saraisky, 2016), researchers have found that strategic coordination (e.g. via social media) to mobilise parents and teachers has led to elected political leaders at the local level and, ultimately, the shift to optional testing that requires parental authorization (Chen et al., 2021). Similar to our study, Wang (2021) drew on network analysis to better understand how actor and discourse networks have shaped the opt-out movement in New York. She found that the opt-out advocacy coalition (i.e. those who supported the movement) was larger in number and in influence, which led to significant gains for the resistance to testing in the state.

While much of the parent-centred resistance literature has come from the US context, others have studied similar movements, including in Israel (Sabag & Feniger, 2022) and Norway (Skedsmo & Camphuijsen, 2022). In Israel, Sabag and Feniger (2022) used the Advocacy Coalition Framework (ACF; Sabatier, 1998; Sabatier & Weible, 2019) to understand how parent-led coalitions led to significant outcomes, including the postponement of standardised tests in 2020. They argue that it was the parents' priority to work with other actors, such as unions, that enabled them to have so much influence. They also contrasted the Israeli and United States movements by highlighting the more official capacity that Israel's elected parent organisations occupied, compared to the more grassroots nature of the opt-out movement in the US. Ultimately, they found that 'the formal cooperation between the Teachers' Union and the National Parent Association created a powerful advocacy coalition that was able to counterbalance the almost absolute power of the Ministry of Education in the highly centralized Israeli education system' (Sabag & Feniger, 2022, p. 12).

In Norway, Skedsmo & Camphuijsen (2022) researched *Foreldreopprør i Oslo-skolen* (FiO, in English: Parental Uprising in the Oslo School), which is another parent-led resistance movement. They found that parents were not only critical of the tests themselves but also the managerial orientation of schools more broadly. The movement advocated for more holistic approaches to schooling, where the whole child was valued and supported. While this movement somewhat resembles the opt-out movement of the United States, it is distinct in that, rather than opting students out of testing, the parents have chosen to opt their students out of public schools

entirely. The authors make the important point, however, that these parents still support public schools and continue to fight for better conditions for all students.

While the specific tactics and actors within these contexts differ, the motivations to disrupt the hyper-focus on testing, standardisation, and accountability are similar. England's situation is similar in that standardisation and test-based accountability have been met with growing scepticism from parents and other public actors (e.g. teacher groups, politicians). One of the groups that has had some success, particularly in their push back against early years' testing, is the More Than a Score (MTAS) network.

4 More Than a Score

More Than a Score is made up of 22 organisations that share similar interests, but that represent a variety of stakeholders. According to their website:

We are a growing movement of parents and carers supporting More Than a Score's campaign to change the way children are assessed in primary school. Why is grassroots support so important to the campaign? Grassroots is important because without people on the ground spreading the word, and without a large number of people making a noise through various channels, we cannot lean on the right people to make change happen.

Some of the groups include, for example, parent-initiated groups, professional organisations, and union groups. While each group seeks to influence education (broadly) in different ways, collectively, they have joined forces to change the ways testing affects students in early years. Over the course of their campaign, they have added to their repertoire of strategies, including the use of professionally produced videos, social media presence, and mass emailing. They have also produced a 'toolkit' that provides tips for individuals who want to get involved within their local area. It is designed to help 'raise awareness of More Than a Score and adds to the growing number of voices opposed to the current system of high stakes government testing in primary schools' (MTAS, n.d., p. 2). These include tips for writing to local council and/or Member of Parliament (MP), how to organise local meetings and events, and how to participate in boycotts.

MTAS frames itself as a grassroots organisation, and it uses this image to promote its agenda amongst possible allies. As we learned in the interviews we conducted with the various leaders of the network, the campaign's original formation reflects this grassroots identity. As we will highlight in the analysis, we also found that certain groups serve a critical role in accentuating the 'grassroots' image. The parent organisations, in particular, bring a level of credibility to this claim, even while the individuals who run these groups bring the technical skills, professional experiences, and connections that provide logistical and expert capital to the range of MTAS's strategies and agendas. In doing so, we argue their political and social capital (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, 2013; Coleman, 1988) as 'parents' provide a sort of 'legitimising capital' to MTAS, but their material experiences and skills cannot be ignored or downplayed. Rather, we see these latter forms of capital as

ultimately what keeps MTAS advancing in their ambitious goals. Before we expand on this argument, we articulate our use of network ethnography to conduct this research.

5 The study

5.1 Methodology: network ethnography

Powerful policy players in global education have been well-researched, such as the OECD, the World Bank, and UNESCO, and others, such as edu-businesses, EdTech companies, philanthropies, and social enterprises, have only recently started to be explored (Hogan et al., 2016; Lewis, 2022; Rowe, 2022). In our previous work (Ball et al., 2017), we gave primary attention to the new actors in the global education policy network (foundations, education corporations, think tanks, funding platforms, and management service companies) while acknowledging the need to study voices of dissent. These dissident voices question and challenge shared beliefs of the mainstream global policy community members, and they are unwelcome and often unheard, or rarely attended to. Such voices are excluded from the mainstream global education epistemic community because they speak about education differently and constitute a network amongst themselves, which we begin to investigate in this paper. We suggest that ‘network ethnography’ (Ball & Junemann, 2012; Ball et al., 2017) is best suited to our attempt to specify the exchanges and transactions between organisations involved in resisting standardised testing in England and the roles, actions, motivations, discourses, and resources of the different actors involved. As mentioned, our focus is on the More Than a Score network, which includes teacher, parent, and headteacher-led organisations, as well as other related professional bodies (see Fig. 1).

Network ethnography involves close attention to organisations and actors within a field; to the chains, paths, and connections that join up these actors; and to ‘situations’ and events in which policy ideas are mobilised and assembled. Börzel (1998: 253) describes policy networks as ‘a set of relatively stable relationships which are of non-hierarchical and interdependent nature, linking a variety of actors who share common interests with regard to a policy and who exchange resources to pursue these shared interests, acknowledging that cooperation is the best way to achieve common goals’. In the case of MTAS, the diversity of organisations involved in the campaign (not only in terms of mission but also in terms of internal structure and representativeness) provides an interesting opportunity to explore interaction and governance within a non-hierarchical space with varying degrees of power (understood in terms of social, economic, reputational, symbolic, and knowledge capital).

There are two key elements in social networks, the ‘nodes’ (which can be individuals, organisations, or even subject positions) and the ‘ties’, which are the links between them. Rather than focus on ‘individual attributes’, social network analysis is a method for studying ‘social relations’ (Burt, 1978). However, the ‘lines’ in a network diagram do not always represent the quality of those relations. The challenge, Crow (2004) warns, is to identify what ‘passes’ through networks. That is,

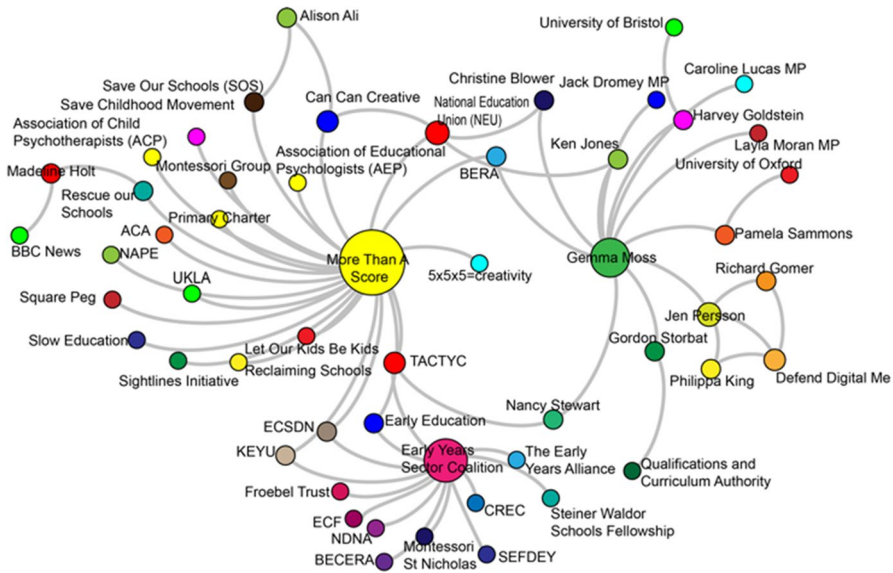


Fig. 1 More Than a Score's network of organisations and individual actors

schemes, programmes, propositions, artefacts, techniques, and technologies move through these network relations. Indeed, they move at some speed, gaining credibility, support, and funding as they move, mutating and adapting to local conditions at the same time. To this end, we focus our analysis on the different forms of value that the participant organisations bring to the MTAS coalition and the particular ways in which these capitals materialise, providing further leverage for policy change.

5.2 Empirical materials

There are different sorts of data involved in network ethnography and a combination of techniques of data gathering and elicitation.¹ Network ethnography requires deep and extensive Internet searches (focused on actors, organisations, events, and their connections). There is a large body of material available online (newsletters, press releases, videos, podcasts, interviews, speeches, and web pages, as well as social media such as Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, and blogs) that can be identified and analysed as data in policy research. Drawing on initial findings from actor- and organisation-focused searches, we then developed topic lists and open-ended questions to inform in-depth interviews with nodal actors within the network. We have conducted a total of 20 semi-structured interviews with directors and spokespersons of member organisations of the MTAS coalition. To maximise the relational

¹ This research received ethical clearance from King's College London (reference code: MRA-18/19-14,344). It should also be noted that we have removed participants' names from this manuscript, though participants were made aware that their identities might be determined based on their affiliations.

potential of interviews, we heavily relied on follow-up questions as a way to explore emergent associations. We also conducted post-interview searches that in turn informed subsequent interviews.

Network ethnography also involves participating in some of the key occasions where the network participants under consideration come together. As Cook & Ward (2012, p. 139) put it, conferences ‘continue to be important in creating the conditions under which policy mobility may or may not take place’. Conferences and other events (both face-to-face and online) are moments when both bonding and bridging ties are forged and renewed (Granovetter, 1973; Putnam, 2000). While COVID-19 restricted the possibility to organise and attend face-to-face events, as part of our network ethnography, we attended a series of online events including the following:

- Toxic testing—why fundamental reforms are needed now (September 22nd, 2019)
- Drop SATs 2021 webinar (September 21st, 2020)—an expert panel with over two hundred school leaders, and Members of Parliament.
- Drop SATs 2021: A United Call for Action (December 15th, 2020)

5.3 Analytic approach

As we followed the network, interviewed major actors, and attended these events, it became clear that parents were one of the most important stakeholders amongst the MTAS organisation. From its earliest stages, the campaign relied on the efforts and motivations of parents. To make sense of these efforts, we overlaid our use of network ethnography with an analytic lens based on Bourdieu & Wacquant’s (2013) symbolic capital. To this end, we started with open coding to identify material related specifically to the parent organisations. We began this process by creating specific boundaries around interview and document data that explicitly (and obviously) dealt with parent-related themes. However, through our analytic memoing (Saldaña, 2021) that we used to track our ongoing thinking and theorising, we began seeing that doing so inadvertently de-contextualised the excerpts. In doing so, we kept ourselves from seeing the parent identity as something that was present regardless if someone was acting in the ‘official’ capacity as parent, or something else (e.g. creative content agent). Therefore, we used the analytic memos to document how the parent identity was used in different ways and to different ends. For this part of the analysis, we drew on the following definition of symbolic capital (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 2013, p 297):

Any difference that is recognized, accepted as legitimate, functions by that very fact as a symbolic capital providing a profit of distinction. Symbolic capital, together with the forms of profit and power it warrants, exists only in the relationship between distinct and distinctive properties, such as the body proper, language, clothing, interior furnishings (each of which receives its value from its position in the system of corresponding properties, this system itself being objectively referred to the system of positions in distributions), and the individuals or groups endowed with schemata of perception and apprecia-

tion that predispose them to recognize (in the twofold meaning of the term) these properties, that is, to constitute them into expressive styles, transformed and unrecognizable forms of positions in relations of force (p 297).

With this definition in mind, we approached our analysis with the following questions: (1) how do the parent groups define their role and position within MTAS?; (2) how does the identity of 'parent' differentiate these groups from the other groups?; and (3) what value or function does the identification of 'parent' serve the broader organisation? In other words, we drew on these questions to think about how these groups 'endowed a schemata of perception and appreciation' that distinguished them from other parts of MTAS and how such distinctions contributed to the 'force' of the organisation's leverage.

After iteratively analysing the data while regularly returning to our analytic questions and theorisation of symbolic capital, we came to see the identity of 'parent' as serving a legitimising function. In doing so, MTAS was able to maintain a 'grass-roots' representation, despite its sophisticated and very well-resourced operations. Importantly, we do not see this as a cynical view of the parent organisations (or of MTAS more broadly). Rather, we see the strategic centrality parents as an important way for MTAS to accomplish its many goals, as we illustrate in the following sections.

6 Analysis

Of the many distinct MTAS organisations, we have classified three of the groups as 'parent-initiated'. These groups were all formed by small groups of parents who had a variety of stated motivations and agendas from the beginning, but who have each found common interests and goals with the broader MTAS initiatives. In our view, what is particularly interesting about these groups is their capacity to not only activate their social and political capital to further MTAS's impact but to also embrace their identity as being 'parent-oriented' as a means for legitimising the 'grassroots' image of MTAS. Despite their relatively small size and financial capacities, the individuals within these groups have significant social and political networks and professional experiences/expertise that help make MTAS possible as it currently exists. However, it is their identity as 'parents' that they centre when framing their roles within the movement. Similarly, some of the actors involved in these particular organisations are also involved (in different capacities) in other MTAS-affiliated groups. In doing so, these parents maintain dual responsibilities, roles and, importantly, identities, which work to serve the broader goals of MTAS in different ways.

The following sections are organised in a way meant to highlight these dual roles. We begin by providing a brief description of each organisation, followed by a more analytical take on the varied ways they use their positions to enhance the goals of MTAS. We argue that their symbolic capital (cf. Bourdieu & Wacquant, 2013) related to image and identity is most important, which we are calling a type of 'legitimising capital'.

6.1 Save our Schools

Save our Schools (SOS) began as a very small organisation and was originally focused almost exclusively on school funding. The person to start SOS also heads the company that manages MTAS's campaign. The group is present across multiple social media sites, including Facebook (5275 as of October 2022) and Twitter (3258 as of October 2022). They also have a designated website where the public can read and/or contribute to a collection of personal stories about their concerns regarding school funding cuts. SOS began after a 2016 student walk-out, which was organised by Let our Kids be Kids (see next section) and was devised to protest high-stakes testing. The walkout garnered a great deal of attention, including SOS's eventual co-founder, whose student participated in the event. As this person put it, the headteacher of her child's school was supportive of the event's purpose, but requested that parents raise questions with their headteacher before keeping their students out of school. She went on to explain that:

I just took him at his word and went and had a meeting with him and talked to him more about the standardised testing and discovered that our views were much more aligned than one might think. And, from there, Save Our Schools...[was] born.

With the common interest in combating school funding cuts, the two brought together local MPs and union members, where they decided that 'on a strategic level, [it was best] to focus on funding for the immediate future, in order to build up a good partnership' (SOS co-founder). As an individual actor, the SOS co-founder is also one of the most involved members of the broader MTAS organisation. In her role as parent and SOS co-founder, she is able to draw on her parent identity to frame MTAS as a grassroots organisation. This identity is prioritised in the ways that she describes the strength and purpose of SOS and MTAS. For example, when she described some of the outcomes of their campaign, she credited SOS as having a real impact on the Conservative party's change of discourse related to school funding, explaining that:

...Because of the pressure from headteachers and parents, as well as the behind the scenes work of unions, ...the Conservative party switched from "there's more funding in schools than ever before", which was the line for several years, to "we know that school funding needs addressing and we're going to put this amount of money into it"

The way she explains why the group has been able to create such an impact, though, is linked closely with its identity as a grassroots organisation that keeps students, parents, and headteachers as the face of the movement. For example, she recalled:

We've reduced MPs to tears with stories of school cuts, you know, and it's, as I say, it's letting children tell their stories for themselves, empowering them to do that, and making sure that we're talking to people's hearts as well as their minds.

Throughout her interview, and which also comes through on the SOS website and related materials, is that it is the ‘grassroots’ nature of SOS and MTAS that provides the political power to create change:

Once politicians see that there is a grassroots movement happening, then, you know, that gives them the courage to make policy announcements.

While the embracing of the grassroots persona is clearly an important feature of these organisations, it is also important to consider the dual roles as a parent co-founder of SOS, but also as the director of MTAS’s creative agency—Can Can Creative. A full exploration of the role of Can Can Creative is beyond the scope of this paper, but the point to highlight here is that the various actors within the MTAS network operate in highly coordinated ways that allow them to draw across the varied capitals and identities that span the group.

6.2 Let our Kids be Kids

Let our Kids be Kids (LKK) was formed by five parents in 2016 (now led by two parents), who decided to organise a student walk-out in protest of high-stakes testing. Their website describes the group as follows:

Let our Kids Be Kids was launched in 2016 by parents who’ve had enough... enough of endless testing, enough of teachers not being trusted to teach, enough of an Ofsted driven, dull, dry curriculum aimed solely at passing National Curriculum Tests (SATs) (Letthekidsbekids.wordpress.com, n.d.).

One of the co-founders explained that their initial motivation was focused on Year 2 SATs, but now concerns all high-stakes testing, ‘as our children have got [sic] older and we’ve started to understand the system a lot more’. Like SOS, LKK embraces their parent identity, stating that:

I’m not a teacher myself, although I did do some work as a teaching assistant and that really did help me to understand what was happening, but predominantly I’m coming from this as a parent rather than a professional.

In a Huffington Post write-up about their 2016 protest, the group highlighted their ‘Parent Power’ as the means through which they ‘took our children out of school as part of a Kid’s Strike – over 8000 parents joined us in the hope that this would encourage schools to boycott SAT tests for Year 2 and Year 6 pupils and make the government listen to their concerns’ (Let Kids Be Kids, 2018).

It should be noted that we only spoke to one person from LKK (referred to as LKK representative); therefore, much of our analytical take here is based on her experiences and positionality, rather than that of the general LKK. However, this participant’s comments illustrate valuable insight into the role of identity and rhetorical framing as it relates to political messaging. Specifically, she expresses a deep understanding of how not only her identity as a parent is important for her role in LKK and MTAS but also that her role as a *privileged* parent within the movement is critical for her capacity to participate in particular ways. As she explains:

I'm in a unique position because I'm self-employed, so I can afford to take a little risk professionally whereas the teachers I know can't take risks because if they lose their jobs by pushing against the system then, you know, they lose their jobs, that's terrible. But I'm self-employed and I had enough support and time to be able to campaign. And I think some of the backlash that we got when we were campaigning so heavily was, you know, that we must be really comfortable and well-off in order to be able to take the time to push against... and a lot of the criticism that we received was, you know, "Oh, middle class nonsense, pushing against the system," but I think there's always going to be an element of that in campaigning, I think it was probably the same with the suffragettes or anybody else who's campaigning: you have to be comfortable enough to be able to take that risk.

We find her understanding of privilege here quite important, especially in thinking about LKK's strategies and goals. For example, we found through the interviews, as well as by carefully following the campaign's varied activities (e.g. social media postings, email communications, virtual forums), that the vocal presence of parents (or 'Parent Power' as some participants call it) is a key feature of the MTAS messaging. However, in order for parents to be able to do this effectively, they need to have strong social networks, political leverage, and professional skills.

Furthermore, as she acutely expresses, the types of risks that parents need to sometimes take are something that not all parents can afford. For example, one of the initial events of LKK was the student walk-out protest. In this particular situation, it is important to consider which students participate in these sorts of events. As has been studied in protest movements in other countries (e.g. the opt-out movement in the USA), such protests are often orchestrated by white, highly educated, and high-income mothers (see, for example, Currin et al., 2019; Pizmony-Levy & Sarasky, 2016).² The excerpt above shows a recognition of such privilege and highlights how an advantaged position (economic and cultural) can be used to voice concerns about the system that affects children across all socioeconomic segments.

However, this does not mean that such efforts should be condemned. Rather, we argue that by understanding these dynamics and characteristics, LKK—and MTAS more broadly—has been able to leverage their various capitals, positionalities, and experiences to maximise the groups' efforts.

6.3 Rescue our Schools

Rescue our Schools (ROS) is another parent-led group that is led by an individual (referred to as ROS representative) who is considered by other participants as one of the key leaders in the overall MTAS organisation. ROS began 'as a kind of broad-based campaign arguing for schools to be locally accountable, to be

² While some scholars dispute this claim (see Casalaspi, 2022, for an example), the majority of literature on 'opt-out' participant demographics shows that such movements are mostly led by higher socioeconomic, white parents.

creative and imaginative and properly funded' (ROS representative). At the outset, ROS was not necessarily focused on early years testing, but after connecting with other school advocates, the group saw the benefits of joining their efforts. While not knowing exactly what the campaign would look like, this group of school advocates created 'a social media platform, principally through Facebook, where we upload articles and we have a very loyal audience of people who are parents, but also often parents and teachers combined'. The group uses ROS to circulate articles about various education issues for the public.

Before ROS began, the ROS representative was running a Meet the Parents campaign that was intended to support the local government schools. She would recruit parents of government secondary school students, who would speak with parents from feeder primary schools to, in her words, 'allow them to talk about their fears, their concerns, to discuss the elephants in the room, which usually are about race and class and lots of old reputations that stick to schools going back years'. She has been running this program for 7 years, while also running ROS for nearly 4 years (at the time of the interview in 2020).

It was not long after launching ROS that it was approached by the teachers' union (then National Union of Teachers) to help launch a new initiative to protest early years testing. From here, MTAS was born. While it seems as though this person's work with Meet the Parents and ROS provided an important appeal for the Union, it is likely her professional background and expertise that have positioned her as one of the principal actors within the broader MTAS organisation. Before pursuing her interests as an education advocate, she was a journalist for a major broadcasting organisation for 10 years. She describes herself as a 'campaigning education filmmaker', which bridges her professional expertise and her drive to influence education.

Similar to the parent-actors previously discussed, this ROS representative embodies her parent identity, while also leveraging her professional skills and expertise to accomplish her ultimate goals (within ROS, Meet the Parents, and MTAS). In the following excerpt from her interview, she describes her approach to her Meet the Parents campaign. In her explanation, she illustrates a need to connect with parents, which is best accomplished by another parent:

I don't think academics have the skillset to be campaigners. Why should they? So...and obviously there's this, you know, sort of counter-narrative of not listening to experts, and that's probably a narrative we're going to see continued for another five years, so... I suppose my take on it is it's a positive message. [Meet the Parents is] not so much criticising grammar schools and the like, but saying, actually, do you know what, you will prepare your kids for the future so much more effectively if you put them into an environment with everybody, with people from different backgrounds, and that means mixed ability, not just comprehensives, and cross curricular and, you know, doing some of the things that I'm making films about... I think you have to talk in the language of individualism and say you will be giving your children an edge by putting them into that environment rather than into a silo.

This excerpt also exemplifies the way that, although she is an expert in messaging and campaigning (given both her previous and current work), it is her identity as a parent that allows her to present herself as a non-expert. By positioning herself in contrast to academics, she is able to signal that she is ‘one of them’, which as the rest of her interview suggests is important for securing parents as a key constituent of the campaign.

7 Legitimising capital

What we found from analysing the parent groups of MTAS, as well as interviews from other members about the parent organisations, is that the parents provide a unique legitimizing capital for the campaign. They can personally express and embody the ‘parent’ identity to project the fears and harms of testing on their own children. The distinction of ‘parent’ functions as a necessary characterisation of these particular groups, but also as a cornerstone of the overall MTAS image. The fact that these actors also have high-level skills and professional networks that are critical to MTAS’s material operation is surpassed only by the symbolic capital that the classification of ‘parent’ affords them.

Similarly, the ‘parent’ distinction enables MTAS to operate—at least symbolically—as distinct from the Union. Given the organisation’s intimate connections with the Union, it was important for the group to establish an identity that distinguished the two groups from one another. In other words, it was an early goal of MTAS to not appear as an extension of the Union, but rather as an autonomous organisation that was able to make claims based on outside expertise regarding the effects of testing. Here, ‘symbols of distinction, which can vary widely depending on the social foil to which they are opposed, are nonetheless perceived as the innate attributes of a “natural distinction”’ (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 2013, p 297), despite the material similarities between the different groups. With this paper, we are not seeking to critique this effort, nor to assess the degree to which MTAS and the Union are indeed separate. Rather, we are interested in how the parent organisations are framed as members of MTAS and how this is operationalised to achieve the campaign’s goals.

Ultimately, we argue that the parent organisations (and the parents as individuals) provide the face and embodiment of the movement, which allows the campaign to present itself as a grassroots organisation, or one that is not controlled by the Union. Interestingly, however, is that in addition to this identity, these particular parents bring a set of skills, backgrounds, and professional expertise that are uniquely suitable for making MTAS run in the ways that it does. From professional journalism, to social media campaign companies, the parents of ROS, LKBK, and SOS, provide a great deal more than simply an image of ‘parents’. Arguably, they provide the cogs and wheels that make the campaign’s efforts successful.

Because of these multiple roles that the parent-led organisations fulfill, we came to see these organisations as needing to be understood in terms of the individual people who lead them (as opposed to seeing them simply as smaller groups of MTAS). This is primarily because it is the individuals themselves who bring the economic,

social, and symbolic capital (e.g. their backgrounds, networks, skills, and status) that make their organisations what they are. In addition to these types of capital, we see the ‘parent-led’ identity of the groups as performing a legitimising function that is particularly valuable within the field of protest. In other words, the individual actors running these organisations are the ones executing the material responsibilities that keep both the individual organisations and the MTAS coalition in operation. While these particular groups were often described as small and rather ad hoc (at the early stages especially), the individuals who run each group are highly skilled in the areas most important to a successful campaign. Therefore, their economic and social capitals are crucial to operations, but their identity as ‘parent’ is what gives MTAS ‘grassroots’ legitimacy.

8 Conclusion

Against a strict focus on numbers, such as the number of parents opting out from statutory tests or how many signatures were collected in support of a specific petition, this paper highlights the importance of understanding the *social* dimension of networks. We were interested in how personal trajectories, capitals, and distinctions interacted with organisational structures in the process of policy contestation and refusal. Unlike other examples of resistance to the demands and pressures placed upon children by test-based accountability systems, MTAS seems to be playing a long-term game, with a focus on paradigm shift rather than immediate policy change. This is similar to the Israeli movement, where the priority is on changing the political structure in ways that support the movement (Sabag & Feniger, 2022). Both movements see long-term value in shifting who sits in positions of power. MTAS attempts to do this by leveraging various material, semantic, and symbolic forms of capital.

As has been documented in other movements, such as the US, Norway, and Israel, parents hold a significant amount of influence. Depending on how this influence is operationalised, these movements have been able to achieve various outcomes. By examining the ‘parent-initiated’ groups of the MTAS coalition, and particularly their conditions of emergence, a central claim of this paper is that resistance demands more than the cumulative nature than other opt-out movements based on individual withdrawal from statutory tests have manifested. It is clearly difficult to resist long-established, heavily bureaucratic structures, and it requires various material conditions such as time, understanding of the education system, and awareness of policy processes and partisan politics, traditions, and alliances. However, the simple availability of these preconditions does not guarantee the sustainability of a campaign. As discussed, the parents who lead the three parent-initiated groups in the MTAS campaign possess some extraordinary resources that certainly exceed the average disenchanted parent. They were able to draw upon a skillset that included outstanding vision, communication, and strategy-building capabilities.

The second claim of this paper relates to the challenge posed by Crow (2004) for social network analysis, which is to move beyond the identification of nodes in a network in order to determine what ‘passes’ through the ties that connect those nodes.

In trying to answer this question, we claim that while these parent groups have certainly contributed to the overall purpose and focus of the campaign, the main in-kind contribution of the ‘parent initiated’ groups to the MTAS coalition is in the form of *legitimacy capital*—as a form of symbolic capital—as their support as members of the campaign gives it a *raison d’être*. That is, without concerned parents, why would the government listen to the demands from opposing interest groups? In this way, we also extend Crow’s (2004) call to also include the external, symbolic projections that also contribute to a network’s status and operation.

Taken together, this paper highlights the need to further theorise the relationship between systems of accountability and policy change and the complex ways in which small grassroots organisations (such as LKK, ROS, and SOS) interact with other well-established, well-resourced organisations (such as unions and professional associations) and negotiate their identity in the collective struggle against dominant discourses and imaginaries.

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Data availability The data used for this study will not be made available to protect participant privacy.

Declarations

Conflict of interest The authors declare no competing interests.

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