

#53: The Zombie: Undying Attacks on Ed Schools

**Jennifer Berkshire:** Welcome to Have You Heard. I'm Jennifer Berkshire.

**Jack Schneider:** And I'm Dracula

**Berkshire:** Outside the winds are howling, the leaves are turning and there's actually a pumpkin in the Have You Heard podcast studio.

**Schneider:** There are two pumpkins. Didn't you see the little white one here? There's the big orange one and the little white one.

**Berkshire:** Adorable. Well, I thought that given that this episode is going to be dropping right around Halloween, that it would be a perfect time to feature a zombie topic.

**Schneider:** Are you going to insert scary music there or should I go?

**Berkshire:** That was really impressive. So Jack, I would imagine that as an education historian you probably have a whole list of zombie-like topics.

**Schneider:** Yeah, there are definitely issues that come up over and over, but it's rare that you get one of those that not only comes up over and over, but that refuses to die in terms of being raised as a kind of crisis issue, being attacked by policymakers and kind of fading into—I don't know what, what? What do zombies fade into? Their closets? They go hide in kids' closets and under beds? In coffins? Anyway, they go wherever zombies go and then they rear their heads again and we, for the last 20 years, have been assaulted by the zombie of teacher education. And just when you thought the zombie was going back to wherever zombies go, you know, we're getting even more heated debate about college and university-based teacher education and alternative certification and, and the zombie wars are eating up again.

**Berkshire:** So Jack, when you say that teacher education programs and really the bashing of them is a zombie issue, how far back are we talking about?

**Schneider:** It goes as far back as teacher education and if you go back further than that, then you know the issue is actually in a kind of a upside down zombie universe is the exact inverse issue. So you go back to the beginnings of public education and the very first kinds of critiques that you start to hear about teachers are these people are untrained, these people are unlicensed. There is no guarantee of minimum competency. How are we going to train these folks? Where is that going to happen? We need teacher training institutes to be built. This needs to happen for everybody. It needs to be the same for everybody. I mean, they're basically articulating the exact opposite position of reformers in the present who are working to dismantle teacher education. And I find that particularly fascinating because, you know, you go far enough back in time and you see a system being built for very particular reasons. Once that system gets

built, then people are of course dissatisfied with it for many of the reasons that I think we'll talk about in this episode and rather than saying like, gosh, this is a really challenging problem, you know, probably characterized by some unsolvable dilemmas, they said, well, you know, let's take apart what we've got right now. Kind of forgetting all the reasons why it was built in the first place.

**Berkshire:** Well, we've got a special guest queued up and ready to join us, but before that, Jack, I wonder if you will just describe to listeners your Halloween costume. You came as an education historian.

**Schneider:** I did. Well, I mean I didn't. You're looking at the outfit as it is hanging on the mannequin I carted in with me. So there's the tweed jacket with the leather elbow patches, some boating shoes. I didn't know—it's New England and so I thought that that was probably something a professor would do, you know, sort of a senior professor who's got maybe a schooner. I don't know boating terminology, but some sort of sailing vessel that he takes out on the Cape and on top, Jennifer, do you know what that is?

**Berkshire:** No, Jack, I don't.

**Schneider:** That's the egghead hat.

**Berkshire:** And don't forget the portfolio-style briefcase for all that extra personality.

**Schneider:** There are lots of accessories. Yeah. So when we turn the podcast into a TV show, our listeners are really going to get a feast for the eyes with this costume.

**Berkshire:** Well we are joined now by Lauren Lefty. She's a doctoral student in the history of education at New York University and the coauthor with James Fraser of a new book called *Teaching Teachers: Changing Paths and Enduring Debates*. Lauren, as far as I could tell, the word zombie does not actually appear in your book, but you describe the bashing of schools of education as a tradition that never dies.

**Lauren Lefty:** Exactly. So as you mentioned, it is this really long running zombie issue. What we could even say that a teacher ed bashing, particularly within schools of education is its own genre in the American canon, right? We can trace that from very early on in the 19th century all the way up to today, which we do in our book *Teaching Teachers*.

**Berkshire:** There are some definite themes that pop up again and again throughout the rich tradition of criticisms of schools of ed. Walk us through some of them.

**Lefty:** Some of the major themes that we target is really from the beginning teacher education has a lot of challenges and it has sort of three taints from the very beginning. It's a very high demand field, particularly with the rise of common schools in the 19th century. It is a less

prestigious field within the broader society, particularly as the economy changes and new opportunities come up in cities, but in rural areas as well. And it has long been associated with women and working classes and middle classes, which gives it this prestige taint from the very beginning. So that's sort of some introductory challenges going into teacher education. Another theme that we look at is that unlike other professions, say the medical profession or the legal profession, teaching has really struggled to develop a set of professional standards, that has sort of made the case that it has a specific body of knowledge that needs to be learned before one can enter a classroom. And so also the history of teacher education reflects that, right?

So this idea that a one needs a four year degree in education didn't really arise until the 1960's. And so there has been a long history of a variety of paths into the classroom which impacted these debates which we think of as only a rising for the first time in the 1980's and 90's—that we need something else. But this idea has been there for decades.

**Schneider:** One of the things that we've talked about before on this show is what Dan Lortie calls the apprenticeship of observation. So many Americans spend 13 years, 180 days a year watching teachers do their work. No other profession comes anywhere close to this in terms of being observed by members of the ordinary public—not doctors, not lawyers, not plumbers. In fact, it would say something pretty terrible about your health or your finances or your duct work if that were the case, but as a result, Americans tend to think that they know what teaching is and they tend to believe that it doesn't look particularly hard. This without question shapes the way that policy makers view teaching as they're thinking through licensure requirements and programs like alternative certification. And I'm wondering if you can talk to that a little bit.

**Lefty:** The idea of trusting the education expert is really suspect from the beginning because of that very reason. And so because everybody has educational experience sitting in classrooms, as you mentioned, watching or observing teachers, that sort of translates to this idea that they also have expertise in education writ large, right? And so there is a widespread belief that anyone who has been in schools, anyone with common sense or at least a university education, even if they weren't trained in education specifically, has that ability and expertise exactly to comment but also to enter the policy making realm.

And so we've seen that throughout history, but particularly in the area that we study in our book, sort of the 1980's to the the present, that period of peak, you know, sort of alternative certification, that many coming from outside the realm of education, in particularly business but, but many realms, are sort of sitting at the policy making table and making decisions.

And with that entry also was the exclusion of teacher educators from the policy making table. So we look, for example, at the rise of the first statewide alternative certification program in New Jersey and it was actually sort of a disqualification if you were a teacher educator to be considered having the right sort of knowledge to make decisions about teacher education reform. Which is a supreme irony, but became a really important theme of that era. It was sort of

a taint if you had that training and expertise because it was thought unnecessary and sort of suspect from the beginning.

**Berkshire:** Your book is also about the rise of alternative certification, something else that turns out to go way back and you argue that the push for different routes into the teaching profession isn't just about deregulation and privatization—the forces that people like me tend to focus on. You maintain that we can't ignore the role of superintendents who need a different kind of teacher than the ones that most schools of ed are producing. They need teacher candidates who can raise test scores in our test-driven era and are better at taking orders than asking difficult questions. It's one of the most interesting parts of the book and I hope that you'll tell us a little more.

**Lefty:** So this becomes a really important part of the story—that you have critiques not only coming from the traditional market reformers, the Milton Friedman crowd, but also what we call the revolt of the superintendents. So administrators, district leaders, principals really become less supportive of ed schools and they lack faith in the ability of these institutions to prepare the teachers. But also it is creating this, you know, arguably more autonomous teaching a professional force, right?, that might make them question the prerogatives of the district leader or the principal, for example. And so there was an effort by superintendents to sort of bring teacher preparation closer to the district level and we see a lot of district teacher residencies, a springing up around the turn of the century as a result of that.

I think another really important critique that comes from an unusual place that we often don't talk about is from the left. So we think again, that this debate falls along partisan lines. That if you are progressive, you usually defend traditional ed school preparation and that if you are conservative, right leaning, or maybe I'm part of the neoliberal category—we can debate the kind of use of that term—but even new Democrats. We sort of split political lines long that way.

But really important critiques in the 1960's and 70's of ed schools and traditional teacher preparation were also coming from the grassroots, the new left which had, you know, critiques of institutions writ large, universities including ed schools. Critiques also came from civil rights activists, a community-control activists who saw these traditional university based programs as sort of upholding an institutional imperial power structure, by mainly preparing a white professional teaching class that excluded the voices of black and Latino communities, and that didn't have high expectations for students of color. And they weren't really wrong in those critiques. But I think those are two, a sort of early impetus critiques that explain the rise of alternative certification that we often leave out of story.

**Schneider:** One of the things that I think comes out of the book and is also apparent if anybody does any work in the history of teacher education, is that there's something for everyone to hate. First of all, it's a massive operation that has tentacles sort of reaching across every aspect of American education in some way. And it's related to something that everybody cares about, which is teacher quality. And because of some of the things we talked about before, you know,

that teaching is a lower prestige occupation, being perhaps the chief among them, that it's really easy to attack teacher education. And so there have long been assaults on teacher ed from the right, the left and the center. But one of the things that I think is really interesting in the book is the discussion about how really it was the right that stepped forward with a vision of the future. And that progressives really kind of fumbled the ball there. That, you know, in many cases they were left just playing defense, trying to defend a problematic status quo rather than offering a kind of clear and coherent vision of an alternative future which gave conservatives and neocons and maybe some neoliberal allies a real opening to kind of run as far as they could with their vision, which often was alternative certification.

**Lefty:** You see some very strange bedfellows in the 1970's when the movement is just taking off. So you see sort of Black power activists aligning with these pro-market Milton Friedman types. And then you see sort of the right end of that taking precedence and dominance in the policymaking conversation and those more progressive critiques losing ground and eventually falling out entirely. And there's a complex reason for that happening, having to do with power and access to the policy making table. But I think it does also have to take into consideration the fact that those within ed schools sort of making the case for their existence and for their worth did really lose out in that battle of discourse and rhetoric.

So as part of our research, you know, I had to watch the multipart series a from the 1980's that aired on PBS with Milton Friedman. And I think the neo liberals really did a very good job at PR in many ways, right? And they sort of continued to do that throughout the 1990's, if we want to see TFA as sort of an offshoot of that. But they really made the case, and made the case to the public in very simple language of why this was the solution to the problem that everyone, on left right and center, seemed to agree existed. Right? There were so many critics, but it was that sort of neoliberal discourse that really made it into popular parlance.

**Berkshire:** Lauren, this episode was inspired not just by the season, but by a recent example of the hating on ed schools genre. In his new book, *How Schools Work*, Arne Duncan places a lot of blame for the state of public education on teacher prep. He argues that basically everything started to go downhill in the 1970's when ed schools shifted away from teaching people how to teach and began to emphasize quote unquote theory. It's the same argument that you often hear conservative education reform advocates make. Apparently everyone agrees that too much theory is the problem, but what does that mean? Help us understand where this comes from.

**Lefty:** This mantra is really representative of one of those discourses that takes hold across the political spectrum: theory away from practice. And this really originates—you know Arne Duncan is not necessarily wrong in that in the 1970's and even sort of mid-century, when normal schools become first comprehensive four year liberal arts colleges and then universities, there is sort of an effort to replicate the model and the prestige ladders you have at prestigious research universities, right? And within those existing research universities—departments of education and standalone education schools—in both spaces, both types of institutions, education

researchers really try and gain the prestige of their disciplinary peers in the social sciences and the humanities. I'm an historian of education, so this happened in the history of ed, you know, to some extent in that you're trying to sort of prove your academic chops within the university. And that often means becoming more theoretical, more speaking to academic debates that, you know, will interest those across the street and other departments rather than those who are working in schools.

And so you do see this critique mounting again from bipartisan sources starting in the 1970's, that education, researchers, and education schools in particular have moved away from practice and are too interested in theory. And teacher ed—it applies broadly to education research—but it becomes one of those fields that is pinpointed specifically as, you know, teacher ed researchers, you know, aren't even really relating what they're talking about in their research to the practice of preparing teachers in a very productive way. So why do we need them anyway, becomes the line of thinking.

**Schneider:** I'm wearing a sweatshirt and a pair of jeans right now. So bear with me. I'm going to put on my tweed coat with the leather elbow patches in order to ask this question and then I'm gonna to climb up to my ivory tower and bring my microphone with me. So let's assume for a moment that theorizing is not a problem, right? It's easy for us to sit and say, 'gosh, you know, the divide between research and practice, the divide between what is taught at colleges and universities and what isn't necessary for teachers to know in order to be successful in classrooms, that's obvious. That's something that should be remedied.

But let me try to play egg headed professor here for a second and say 'I wonder if there is actually some benefit to that in terms of the low level of prestige of ed schools in general and teacher education in particular. If we're thinking about the long-term goal of professionalizing teaching, which has a lot of potential upsides, that if teaching is viewed as a higher prestige occupation, that it may attract more candidates who were more serious about pursuing it longer term, staying in it for a career rather than a few years, which is a sort of disturbing trend we've seen play out over the years. We might see more professional respect for teachers which might translate into higher salaries. There are lots of sort of theories of action that we could build around this idea of teacher professionalism.

But in order for teachers to be understood as professionals, it seems like one of the key requirements is professional training that happens at a college or university. And that is in some way controlled by folks who have created a kind of body of knowledge that probably has some theoretical aspects to it. And so I'm wondering, you know, do you see any benefit to what seems obviously so problematic?

**Lefty:** I really do. And I think part of it is changing the discourse. We have a long history to fight against, but instead of seeing this embrace of theory as a problem and as a reason for getting rid of ed schools, we really need to frame it as an asset. And I think a lot of education researchers have been making the case. And I think sort of two decades, three decades after

the first alternative search vacation programs appeared, people are starting to recognize the value of that theory, the value of this professional body of knowledge, however problematic that might be in the realm of education.

But I really think it can be an asset and for people working in teacher preparation in ed schools, um, I do think we need to make the case that, you know, to ourselves, we need to kind of stop playing this prestige game within the university, and embrace our theory and practice relationship and divide as an asset. It's a really exciting part of universities that often claim that they are in the public service, right?, and not just these ivory towers. Ed schools are one of the most exciting places to really connect these academic theories with practices in exciting ways.

I think another way that we can really embrace that is that it really challenges this idea of expertise within universities, if we do it in the right way. So when we are conducting our research and producing these theories about education, ed schools are also, I think, often on the cutting edge of things like participatory action research, which bring in community members, teachers, families, students in producing that theory and knowledge. And again, we need to frame that as an asset, which I think it really is, rather than sort of the problem as too many people have framed it for a long time.

**Berkshire:** Now Lauren, I know you're still in graduate school, but if we were to use our podcasting powers to appoint you Minister of Education, how might you use your new sweeping powers to remake the field of teacher education? And if there are programs out there that you think are doing a particularly good job, this is your chance to give them a shout out.

**Lefty:** Minister of Education Lefty would definitely have some ideas. And I think exactly it represents sort of this hybridization that we see possible. As you mentioned, Jennifer, there are some really exciting models out there. The idea of hybrid models is not really drawing some of the best from these both camps that we often pit against each other as completely oppositional. But these hybrid models, and often they're kind of institutional hybrids in themselves with partnerships between universities, with districts, sometimes with unions and private educational nonprofits—they really try and draw again on the insights of both traditional preparation, using the theory that's being produced in universities and combining it with some of the more interesting creative, new and different ways of preparing teachers that alternative certification programs have really been employed in the past couple of decades.

And so we have looked at places like the urban teacher residency in Seattle, which is a really exciting model. They were one of the first to successfully bring in the union to the policy making table, as well as the district and the university. And there you see a teacher educators—professional, university based teacher educators—extremely involved in curriculum development, and in shaping how teachers are prepared. But that being said, the district is also involved, and students are in the classrooms from day one until the last day of school. The union has a say in sort of shaping this program. So it's not seen as a threat to teacher professionalism necessarily. And I also think they do a really good job of bringing community

members and parents and local nonprofits to that policy making table as well. So that is one exciting model you see sort of springing up around the country.

UCLA has a really exciting community-based social justice ed school that has some of these innovative models. But residencies that again, kind of draw the best of both worlds are really sort of the new hybrid model that we're seeing a couple of decades on from these kind of five week quick prep, you know, teacher alternative certification programs, that bring the parties together. So, you know, maybe that's a little optimistic and we do need to tread lightly and not just say that this is the new reform *du jour* that will solve all of the problems with teacher education. But we are hopeful through our research, through our case studies, that these new models could really sort of bridge some of that acrimony that has characterized the last couple of decades of teacher prep, bringing people together at the same table, learning from each other.

**Berkshire:** What kinds of programs do you think really need to wither away?

**Lefty:** And so we didn't name any in the book specifically that are particularly awful, but from experience, my coauthor James Fraser has been involved in teacher prep for a long time, I think we both witnessed both ends of the spectrum. So there are traditional programs that really haven't responded to any of the critiques over the decades, that is weighted, you know, to theory away from practice, the student teaching is not that effective or helpful for teachers in training. It's just not very good prep, right? And that happens within universities. There are also alternative certification programs that are really just a credential. You know, you can pay for it and there's very little oversight, very little training or really very little theory and practice involved. We are also extremely wary of these for profit providers that are getting into the game either in the form of, you know, quote unquote universities like the University of Phoenix, but also alternative providers that, you know, are really looking at the bottom line and sort of trying to cash in on the fact that teachers need certain credentials and pieces of paper before entering the classroom.

**Berkshire:** That was Lauren Lefty. She's a doctoral student in the history of education at New York University and the coauthor of a new book called teaching teachers changing paths and enduring debates and Jack and I will be right back for a final round of edges, zombies versus education historians.

[Spooky music]

**Berkshire:** Since this is kind of a special episode timed for Halloween, I agreed to let Jack incorporate a trick or treat aspect into it.

**Schneider:** Wow. I really feel like I fell down on the job because all I did was come up with a question for you, like a stump the chump question. And if I had realized that there was a trick or treat element to this, that there would have been fake blood involved. I would have been in

costume. I would have put my fake tweed jacket on and climbed up to my fake ivory tower wearing my egghead hat. So. Okay. Well with no further ado, Jennifer, here's your quiz question. So I want you to tell me plus or minus, I don't know, what do you want? Five years? You want a buffer of five years, 10 years? I'll give you a decade plus or minus a decade. Tell me when this was uttered. "Improvements in school organization, school hours and apparatus are vain without good teachers."

**Berkshire:** 1972.

**Schneider:** That's weird. It's wrong. I thought maybe you were going to guess 2009-ish because that's when Barack Obama made that big speech where he said, you know, the single most important factor is the person in front of the classroom. There was this big push, right? That only teachers matter and that's where we should be investing all our resources and, you know, we get the Gates Foundation trying to leverage that. No, this is 1871. So you were off by 100 years. One hundred and one years. You said 1972. So close but no cigar for you on this one. \

So I thought that this was good in terms of our zombie theme here, because this is, as you said, a zombie issue and what's really kind of eerie is the way that the past is rearing its head, not just in terms of this issue coming up over and over again, but the completely ahistorical approach that policymakers tend to take to this issue leads them down this path where they are recreating a situation that 100 years ago, in fact, more than that 150 years ago was completely unacceptable to policymakers at the time. They lived in an era where there was no regulation of teachers, where, you know, anybody with a high school education then, and many are pushing for a college education today, could walk into a classroom and begin teaching if, you know, the principal said, okay, and the school committee gave thumbs up. That was in the eyes of policymakers of the era a really potentially disastrous situation that they wanted to remedy.

And it took them 100 years to remedy it. You know, it took throughout the late 19th century and early 20th century. And it's really not until mid-century that you get the sort of the triumph of the model of college and university based teacher education and as soon as we get that, then there is this push to deregulate and we now live in an era where people are talking about what they want for teacher education as if 1871 had never existed. And they're in fact using a lot of the same language that people use to justify the exact opposite policy.

**Berkshire:** Eighteen seventy what???. Well, once again, Jack, I find myself absolutely captivated by education history. Who knew that it could be so relevant?

**Schneider:** You should save that for our April Fool's episode! So, you know, the last point that I wanted to make, because this is a topic that I've written a lot about as members of our Patreon select gold platinum elite members club will learn when they get the reading list for this episode, I think there's something really interesting here if we can conceive of it in terms of problems and dilemmas and that our inability to distinguish between the two has led to this kind of zombie effect, particularly with regard to a kind of back to the future push for deregulation. Because of

course teacher education is flawed. We're trying to do essentially the impossible here for a just massive number of Americans. We're trying to produce high-quality training without doing it embedded in the field, which we can't do for a variety of reasons, on a shoestring budget because we are tied to tax dollars and teacher salaries are never going to be high enough to justify them taking out all the loans to do multi-year teacher training.

I mean, it is just a highly fraught enterprise. Nevermind the fact that we're trying to teach people to do the impossible, which is cultivate human improvement, and young people go off and don't want to be there. So needless to say, lots of problems. But lots of the problems in teacher education have in fact been solved over the years. You go back far enough in time and you can read about all these problems being identified. The teachers don't have practice teaching, they don't have adequate mentorship, they don't have peers who are supporting them through their first years. It goes on and on and on. Many of those problems have been solved over time. But then there are these dilemmas and a classic one is length versus volume. As Jim Fraser and Lauren's book makes clear there are some boutique programs out there that are just dynamite.

They do an incredible job of teacher education, but they're tiny. And one of the core dilemmas here is how do we do what we want to do when we are trying to do it at the scale that we need to do it? That is something we are basically never going to get around. And you don't solve a dilemma, you manage it. And so the place where I want to end this episode is introducing a potential—I know I'm mixing my metaphors; you don't kill zombies with silver bullets—but there is in fact a kind of silver bullet here, which is for us to just get clear as folks who are interested in education and as members of a sort of broader educational community, to be clearer about what the actual problems are because the problems are solvable and then to get really clear on what the dilemmas are in and put our heads together about trying to manage those rather than trying to slay them. Those are the true zombies. They cannot be slayed.

**Berkshire:** You just gave me a great idea, Jack. What if we take this topic with us into the weeds? As our regular listeners know, this is the portion of the program when we tried to lure you to Patreon.com to become a regular sustainer of the program. It helps us keep the podcast going and there's something in it for you as well. As Jack just alluded to, our supporters get access to a reading list and I'm guessing that since this is the subject that Jack writes about, this reading list will be particularly robust.

**Schneider:** Jennifer is, of course, using me as bait here. She's sitting atop the paywall and luring you towards its edges, dangling an expensive rope down to you. So if you're not interested in that, you are of course able to support the show in many other ways and perhaps the easiest is to just share it with your friends, to tell them that you like it, to encourage them to listen. Another is to engage with our twitter handle at @HaveYouHeardPod, and a third way is to go on iTunes or wherever you get your podcasts and to give us a rating, preferably a five star rating with a very long explanation about, you know exactly why this show is the bee's knees.

**Berkshire:** And if you are interested in supporting us, just go to [Patreon.com](https://www.patreon.com) and search for Have You Heard. Until next time, I'm Jennifer Berkshire.

**Schneider:** And I'm Jack Schneider.