

#69 Can Progressive Charter Schools Survive in the Education Marketplace?

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

Jack Schneider: And I'm Jack Schneider.

Berkshire: And about six months ago we launched our very first in the history of the world graduate student research contest.

Schneider: It was our first in the history of the world, but perhaps not the first graduate student research contest in the whole history of the entire world.

Berkshire: And while it pains me to say this, the idea really did come entirely from my cohost Jack Schneider, and it turned out to be a really good idea.

Schneider: I would just love to hear you say that on repeat. That might be the new ringtone for my phone, Jennifer.

Berkshire: So we put out a call. We put it out on Twitter. We sent it to everybody we knew and we got a really pretty amazing response. We got more than a hundred graduate students who were engaged in some kind of research having to do with education and we didn't just ask them to tell us about their research. We asked them to make the case for why it would make a good pod.

Schneider: That's part of the broader mission of our show, to make educational research, you know, whether sort of formal in nature or otherwise, more accessible to people, and to discuss it oftentimes with the people who are actually conducting it.

Berkshire: Well, the entries flooded in and we whittled them down. We went through and thought about what were the research questions people were exploring that we thought were really interesting. And then we had a semifinal group and we asked them to take the next step, which was to record themselves talking about their research.

Schneider: And it was at that stage, and I'm not sure you know this Jennifer, that I took your recommendation and started watching the Great British Baking Show, and we had both the really fantastic job of calling people up and telling them that they were our winner and runner up, but also the really terrible job of throwing people off the Baking Show, which was really heartbreaking because they were so good. Every single one of the contestants had, you know, a really cool research project and was able to speak to it in a really thoughtful way. And then particularly the finalists made some really great recordings that were really fun to listen to. And somewhere in an alternative universe, they won a different version of this contest. And I look forward to listening to their podcasts.

Berkshire: Well, Jack, I'm going to suggest that without further ado, you tell us who the equivalent of the prize baker in our graduate student research podcasting competition was.

Schneider: The star Baker for this year

Berkshire: I can't believe I got that wrong...

Schneider: Yeah, I know. It was Elise Castillo from the University of California Berkeley. And we're going to spend this episode talking with her. And in some future episode we will talk to the runner up, Barry Goldenberg from Teacher's College at Columbia University

Berkshire: To set the stage for Elise's research, you need to know a little bit about her story. Long before she became Dr. Castillo, she was a teacher in New York City. She taught in both public and charter schools during the early days of No Child Left Behind. But it wasn't until she got to grad school that she was able to really process what she'd experienced as a teacher.

Elise Castillo: And at the time I didn't know very much about education policy or politics. And market based reform was not at all in my vocabulary. But I knew I wanted to go to graduate school to understand education policy and politics. And when I got there, when I got to Berkeley, I began to understand better how all my experiences as a teacher were shaped by a policy and political environment that favored market values. So for example, I began to understand why I felt so constrained as a teacher to focus on quantitative measures of success, both for myself and my students. And I understand better why the traditional public school where I taught feared that charters would take over our building. And I also understood why the charter school where I taught was vying for more space in this building.

Berkshire: Fast forward a couple of years and Elise is deep into graduate study. She's preparing to take her qualifying exams and her reading list is packed with studies about education policy and market-based reforms. Then one of her faculty mentors asked a question that Elise couldn't answer.

Castillo: What about charter schools that aren't steeped in a marketized agenda? So in other words, what about the charters that are not captured by all of the studies that were on my reading list? What about charters that leverage their autonomy to experiment with practices that aren't rooted in market values? And what can those schools tell us about the possibilities for equitable and democratic public education? And so with those questions, I knew I wanted to push myself to pursue a project that aimed to understand a kind of charter school that I didn't know very much about from either personal experience or when I was studying in graduate school, and that I also didn't really get a sense of the research or the news media or paying as much attention to. And those are charters that are really oriented around a different set of tenets, and are really trying to institute a more progressive political and pedagogical approach against the backdrop of widespread market values.

Berkshire: So, Jack, I want to bring you back in. A couple of episodes back you made the argument that good research should make us feel conflicted and even a little uncomfortable, and that's a big part of why we picked Elise as our winner. She's taking a subject that we think we know all the answers to and forcing us, and by 'us,' I mean me in particular to view it in a different way.

Schneider: Yeah. The debate around charters particularly has become so stale and uninteresting where clear battle lines have been drawn up and you are expected to adhere to kind of a rigid ideology for or against. And Elise's research reminds us that there actually are a lot of things to like about charter schools, at least in the idea of autonomy for educators. The idea of crafting a school mission that is unique and tailored to a community. The idea of trying to experiment and promote the kinds of practices that might work in a particular context—that those are all in line with many of the progressive approaches that people have been advocating for for over a hundred years in public education. And she reminds us of this while also showing us that there are some forces, namely which she calls the neoliberal grammar of schooling, which I'm excited to talk with her about, that have prevented many charter schools from really living out this progressive mission.

Berkshire: If you're taking notes at home, jot down 'neoliberal grammar of schooling'—we'll be returning to that in a little bit. But first let's hear some more about Elise's research. She looked at three different progressive charter schools, including one that she refers to in her study as Empire Charter School. It was started by progressive educators and its founding mission was to be a diverse community-based school with a progressive curriculum that emphasize things like exposure to nature and political engagement. But the school was also under pressure to generate results.

Castillo: There was a concern over the test scores, first of all, the test scores of the school. The school leaders and the board trustees felt that the test scores were not as high as they would have liked and they perceived that the low test scores mattered a lot for successful charter school renewal as well as for retaining enrollment. There was a sense that families, even if from the beginning they were attracted to Empire's progressive approach, wanted to see that their kids were getting results. And that these kinds of families were leaving the school because they didn't see the results, and that the school was not, you know, in their eyes, a successful school.

Berkshire: Money and other resources were a big issue as well. Empire was competing against charter management organizations that had way more money and more staff to do things. The concerns of school leaders over test scores and how to compete with bigger, better resourced charter networks led Empire to make a number of decisions that at least argues or at odds with its founding progressive mission.

Castillo: One of the decisions was to change their admissions policy. And what they did was they ended what's called backfilling where, if a seat opens up in the middle of the school year, if a student moves away, backfilling means that a student can be admitted off the wait-list in the

middle of the year. Now Empire stopped doing that because they were concerned that students who were admitted in the middle, in the middle of the year, were low performing students who would bring down the school's test scores.

Berkshire: Elise argues that ending backfilling what against empire's original vision of advancing greater opportunity for students in the community. And a new emphasis on test prep also represented a shift away from Empire's progressive roots.

Castillo: They instituted a variety of explicit test prep activities. So these included after-school tutoring that was really focused on practicing for the test as well as assigning homework that was a series of practice test questions. And so I saw this as also compromising their progressive pedagogical approach, where there's more emphasis on the learning outcomes and the tests rather than the kind of project-based child centered learning process.

Berkshire: As Elise observed what was happening to Empire and the other two charter schools in her study, she also understood that this drift away from their progressive founding principles was not unique to them. Remember back in the early days of the charter school movement when people used to talk about letting a thousand flowers bloom? Well what Elise saw looked a lot more like a monoculture.

Castillo: The way I see it, to build on that metaphor is that we now have a policy environment that if we think about it in terms of an ecological environment or seeing that the sun only shines in certain places and the rain only falls in certain places. And what is happening in that ecosystem is that that encourages only a particular kind of flower to bloom. So as you described it, kind of encourages more of a monoculture, and kind of constrains the potential for other kinds of approaches.

And what I saw in my study is that, you know, kind of another way to think about the monoculture idea is that schools that had been firmly rooted in one set of philosophies and ideas started to grow in the direction of the sun and the rain. And kind of thinking about what that means in terms of the policy context. What is the sun and the rain? I see it as policies that have, especially over the last decade or so, primarily supported a kind of charter school that is shaped around market values of efficiency, competition, private management and a results-oriented culture, as well as really powerful political advocates and philanthropic supporters that are also supporting that model of schooling.

Berkshire: Elise's research also got her thinking about what would need to change in order for schools like Empire to be able to hold on to their original progressive visions.

Castillo: I spoke earlier about this kind of emphasis on test scores that I saw in the schools that I studied. So, you know, if there were policies, particularly charter policies that aligned how schools were evaluated with schools' founding mission—so in the case of the schools I studied,

their founding progressive mission. So in addition to, or instead of test scores, what if they were evaluated on some of the progressive components that they said that they wanted to cultivate in students? So their civic development, their emotional development, their understanding of the communities in which they live, the extent to which schools really facilitated racial and socioeconomic integration and students' understanding of, you know, how to interact with people different from themselves, things like that.

So if the policy environment shifted from emphasizing market values and quantitative outcomes towards, I would argue, a more progressive approach, then I think we can begin to challenge the neoliberal grammar of schooling and encourage different kinds of approaches to charter schooling and traditional public schooling.

Berkshire: So Jack, you probably saw how excited I got just now listening to Elise. She dropped a reference to the neoliberal grammar of schooling.

Schneider: Yes, indeed. I was actually, I was excited to hear Elise say that, not only because it triggers your favorite buzzword, but also draws on a metaphor crafted a couple decades ago by a couple of mentors of mine, David Tyack and Larry Cuban who taught at Stanford University and actually taught a course called the history of school reform, which led to a book they co-authored together called *Tinkering Towards Utopia* in which they described the phenomenon of the grammar of schooling, which like a grammar in language really gives shape, uh, both in terms of providing form for language or in this case schooling, but also really restricts what is possible. Right?

You can't just say whatever you want to say and be understood as speaking English or some other language. You have to adhere at least loosely to some grammatical rules to be intelligible. Uh, something is quite similar in schooling where, uh, there's a kind of grammar that people expect to be there in order for something to be considered a school. What makes a summer camp different from a school? That in many ways is dictated by the grammar of schooling and really limits what can happen inside schools. It really constrains reform in good ways, but also in bad ways.

Berkshire: Of course, one element of the education marketplace that we talk a lot about on this show is 'advertising.' In fact, we did a whole episode with researcher Sarah Butler Jessen on the book she wrote with Catherine DiMartino called *Selling School*. Well, Elise found that the progressive charter schools in her study were also doing tons of advertising. A school she calls Liberty hired a marketing consultant and developed a website, glossy brochures... All part of an effort to sell the school to prospective families.

Castillo: So those are some of the ways that they really tried to compete with other schools for students and for families. And they really did center their mission in some of the outreach material. So some of their, you know, kind of distinctive characteristics around how they were not a [charter management organization]—they really were a community-based school. They

were really seeking to enroll and integrated and integrated student population as well as some of their curricular emphases on...they also had kind of a sustainable sustainability focus in their curriculum. So a lot of that was really part of their marketing materials.

But also in an interview with that school leader, she did talk a lot about how it does take a lot of her time and her energy to do all of those kinds of marketing activities. So I think similar to the book on edvertising, an argument that Katherine and Sarah raised in that book, I think what I found in my study suggest similarly that having to participate in these marketing activities takes away from the time that could be spent on focusing on teaching and learning. And more specifically focusing on cultivating the realization of the progressive mission at this particular school.

Berkshire: Remember back when Elise was getting ready to take her qualifying exams and she had all those books and studies about market-based education reform? Well, one thing we were curious about was whether her research has left her feeling more or less hopeful regarding the future. Can progressives challenge the market orthodoxy on education the way that they've been doing with say, health care or student loans? Elise says she's actually very hopeful. The Los Angeles teacher strike for example, forced a debate in that city about the impact of competition for funds and kids. And now there are signs of change on the other coast.

Castillo: Where I am in New York, on the state level, during the November mid-term elections, we saw, I believe six, incumbent state senators who had been caucusing with senate Republicans on issues related to charter schools and other market based education reforms. All six of those incumbent senators were unseated by progressive Democratic candidates. So I think that is a sign that, you know, we're starting to see a shift in politics and culture that challenges these kind of long standing, long taken for granted market values and market logic, which I've tried to talk about as this enduring neoliberal grammar of schooling.

So I think those are some of the ways in which I see some beginnings of chipping away at kind of the ways in which we've seen the enduring kind of taken for granted embrace of the market as the kind of one way to do things, or the right way to do things.

Berkshire: That was Elise Castillo, the winner of our first ever Have You Heard graduate student research contest. And in addition to winning our top honors, she's just received her PhD from UC Berkeley. She'll be spending next year doing a postdoc in Connecticut at Trinity College. Congratulations Elise on all fronts, and Jack and I will be right back to wrap things up.

[Music]

Berkshire: So Jack, one of the things that I realized in the course of our, you know, reading through and listening to our entrants in the contest was that graduate school puts people in this weird position in that they go into school, they become really passionate about a particular issue and then they're put in a situation where they have to write about it in a way that few ordinary people can understand. And the more I thought about that, it made me feel kind of sad.

Schneider: Yeah. I feel the same way. In fact, I've had a number of conversations with people who are considering PhDs in education, uh, where we have talked about a kind of active resistance to the kind of training that you receive in graduate school, which teaches you insider language, which of course is very important for communicating with insiders and establishing your credibility and legitimacy with them. Uh, but which often can isolate you from broader conversations, particularly in the world of practice. Um, something similar happens in terms of the places where you are trained to send your work. Peer reviewed journal articles are the gold standard in the world of higher education. Uh, particularly for folks who are on the tenure track but are often read by, you know, only a few dozen or at most a few thousand people. Uh, by contrast, you know, even, uh, a popular blog, we'll get a hundred times that many hits in a single day.

Berkshire: Well, I so enjoyed getting a chance to read Elise's research and, and meet her and talk to her and I just want to say again, Jack, that you really did have a great idea with this one.

Schneider: You know, it sounded good the first time, but when you repeat it like that, it makes it sound like it's the only time that has ever happened.

Berkshire: Well, a huge thank you to everyone who entered our competition. Jack, are we going to do it again next year?

Schneider: Absolutely. We will send out the call sometime in the fall and begin working our way through the applications and then have both the thrill and the pain of letting people know that they have advanced or not in this great school reform bake off of ours.

Berkshire: Well, speaking of the thrill and the pain, it is time once again for me to try to lure listeners over the paywall. Jack loves it when I do this. As our regular listeners know, we rely on your support to keep the pod going, to pay our excellent producer and we do that using Patreon. All you have to do is go to [Patreon.com](https://www.patreon.com), search for Have You Heard and you'll see what cool extras you can get for just a small donation every month—like reading lists and a trip into a special place that we like to call in the weeds.

Schneider: Before I do my usual anticapitalist rant, I will support you Jennifer in this effort because of course you just did some on the ground reporting in Michigan. Uh, so our pantry on account not only helps us pay for our producer but helps to pay for the kind of work that we do here at. Have you heard beyond simply talking to experts? Uh, as many of our listeners know, Jennifer is a great journalist and, uh, being able to send her out into the field is one of the things we can do with your support. But before I end, I will remind people that there are many ways that you can support the show without opening your pocketbooks. Uh, perhaps the best of them is to go on and leave us a review wherever you get your podcasts. Hopefully a friendly one. Um, and equally good is to share episodes with friends, colleagues, family members, anybody who you think would be interested.

Berkshire: And I of course need to tell you what the topic of our special extended play episode is. Some of you know that Jack and I have written a book. It will be out next year and we have a conundrum. What is the book going to be called? We will be discussing this in the weeds and we're also going to be asking for your input.

Schneider: I think that's it.

Berkshire: Until next time, I'm Jennifer Berkshire.

Schneider: And I'm Jack Schneider.

Berkshire: This is Have You Heard.