

#75 Storefront School: Excavating A Radical Education Experiment in Harlem

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

Jack Schneider: And I'm Jack Schneider.

Berkshire: And Jack, I'd like to start this episode just by wishing you happy anniversary.

Schneider: These, these cryptic quizzes that you continue to issue when we are on air are, um, growing more endearing with each passing episode. I was going to say, uh, very much appreciated by someone, I'm sure. Okay. Anniversary. Can you just like, can you give me like a number of decades or years? No, you're giving me a look like 'good luck, Jack.' Okay. It's 2019, so 2009, 2000. I don't even know how to subtract 25...

Berkshire: This is very revealing for our listeners.

Schneider: 1994 would have been 25 years. That is not ringing a bell. 30 years. Okay. No, no, no, I got it! This may not be the anniversary you had in mind, but 2019 is 30 years after the Charlottesville Education Summit, which George H. W. Bush organized to push forward national standards that eventually his son George W. Bush drove forward in Texas and made the centerpiece of his education agenda that would be No Child Left Behind. And in Charlottesville, in 1989, a little known Arkansas governor named Bill Clinton chaired the program and then adopted George H. W. Bush's failed national legislation, which I can never get it straight if it was America 2000 or Goals 2000. Whichever one Bush failed on, Clinton rebranded, slam dunked with, and then set the stage for George W. Bush to advance further when it was NCLB time. Am I close?

Berkshire: Wow. Now, when did it be funny if after all that...

Schneider: You're so mad! Look how mad you are right now! I'm right.

Berkshire: What if it turned out that it was in fact your wedding anniversary?

Schneider: Yes, I should take this opportunity to say happy—I should know the number here—2006... Happy 13th anniversary to my bride. Thanks Jennifer.

Berkshire: Thank you Jack for that little trek down memory lane. And as it happens, this episode also involves a trip down memory lane. Jack: Do you remember back in the days when you used to climb into the time machine?

Schneider: Oh my gosh, are we going to do that today???

Berkshire: No, we're not because we have, we have a guest on. Now regular listeners may remember that last year we held our very first Graduate Student Research Contest. We invited grad students from all over to reach out to us and submit their research and also make the case for why it would make for a good pod. And we got around a hundred entries and the stuff we got was so good that even though we had originally planned to pick one winner, there was another entry that we thought so much of that we decided that he also deserved an episode.

Schneider: Yeah. So if people haven't listened to our episode with Elise Castillo, they should go back into the archives and listen to that. Elise was our grand prize winner for the Graduate Student Research Contest and we did a Presidential event at AERA with Elise and with the person who is going to be on today, Barry Goldenberg from Teacher's College at Columbia University. And we were also joined in that session by Tina Trujillo from UC Berkeley and by Hunter Gelbach, who is now at Johns Hopkins. It was a great event and I think audio of that is actually available on the AERA website. And I'm really excited actually to talk about Barry's research today.

Berkshire: So one of the things that really jumped out at me about Barry's research was that he excavated a kind of lost history of a school that existed in central Harlem for seven, seven years from the late sixties to the early seventies. And I think what's so amazing is that not only does he bring this school to life, he's spent years researching it and talking to alumni and former teachers, but he manages to sort of project why that vision of alternative education is so relevant today.

Schneider: I think Barry does what lots of good historians do or people who are writing historically and they expand our understanding of the possible. That's not the only use of history, but because history often shows us a kind of foreign country right? The past as a place that is in many ways unrecognizable to us. Um, it often serves this function of challenging us to think more expansively about the future and about what is possible. And I think Barry's study does a really nice job of taking something that actually did happen and presenting it in a clear enough way that we are challenged, then, to think about why don't we have schools like this right now? Or why don't we have many of them and why aren't we talking about creating more schools like this?

Berkshire: Well we are so happy to get to talk to Barry Goldenberg. He's the runner up in our Graduate Student Research Contest. Barry recently completed his PhD at Columbia University and he wrote his dissertation about Harlem Prep, an independent community school that operated in central Harlem from 1967 to 1974. Harlem Prep graduated some 800 students, almost all dropouts from the New York City Public Schools. It's a fascinating story starting with the fact that Harlem Prep ran out of a former grocery store. Here's Harlem Prep headmaster Ed Carpenter, talking about the school in a short documentary called Harlem Prep, Step-by-Step.

[Film audio excerpt]

Berkshire: So Barry, first of all, welcome and congratulations on finishing your PhD and faring so well in our contest. I want you to just start by describing what people would see if they were say, walking through central Harlem in the late sixties and came upon Harlem Prep.

Barry Goldenberg: You know, upon entering Harlem Prep, you're right in the middle of the heart of Harlem, central Harlem and you see a building with... it used to be the old supermarket, right? And so you see all those front windows where students are bustling around and you see a big science as high of a preparatory school. And as you walked in, you just see students and teachers and desks everywhere and chairs and tables and this big open space environment. If you can picture a supermarket but no food aisles right to students and teachers and administrators and in books and tables and chairs. That's what it looked like. It was a place with so much energy. It was always buzzing. People were in and out and it was right in Harlem as well. And so you saw, you know, students were always in front and then if you walk inside, you'd see hundreds, hundreds more.

It was just a really exciting place with a lot of activity and energy all the time. That's what students, alumni always tell me when I ask them what was Harlem Prep like. They say there was always so much going on. So much energy, that hustle and bustle and this academic environment in this informal way in this open space classroom environment that used to be a supermarket and that was a school. And so that's kind of the, the expressions that I get when I speak with alumni about what was Harlem Prep, like once you just walked into this place.

Berkshire: There is a lot about Harlem Prep that will feel familiar to observers of the current education landscape. And yet there's something missing. You don't hear the school leaders talking about blowing up the system. They had a different approach than the quote unquote disruptors that we're so familiar with today.

Goldenberg: Yeah. They weren't seeking to disrupt the system or displace education, public education. All the founders, Ed Carpenter and Ann Carpenter, a husband and wife pair, they were both public school teachers and counselors for a long time. They believed in public education, believed in a community-driven school, and they just wanted to show, you know, what they can do if they rethink education and, exactly, not in a cookie cutter way, but in a way steeped in love. I know it sounds corny, but it's really true that if you give students the freedom to learn, if you inspire them, they can do amazing, amazing things. It isn't about creating a system, or having anything rigid, but actually the opposite, about having flexibility.

Students could take classes like a college student for example, right? They had blocks and sometimes they come in later, sometimes they'd leave early, right? Some students who had children could come in at separate times. You had open space classrooms, you had teachers who didn't have credentials. So what is it about creating a system? It was providing flexibility and about freedom, freedom of expression, certainly, but a freedom for teachers to best work with students in ways that were most adaptable and most productive for each student.

Schneider: Looking at Harlem Prep it in some ways strikes me as a charter school, right? In that we've got schools like this today, that there is a sector for experimentation. And then on the other hand, I don't tend to see these kinds of true alternatives in the charter sector. There are out there a few of them, and some of them are in traditional public schools. But I'm wondering what you think about the extent to which Harlem Prep speaks at all to today's moment? What does it teach us about the power of chartering? What does it teach us about the power of alternatives? What does it teach us about the traditional public education system?

Goldenberg: We think about charter schools today, or at least in this discourse that they're replacing public education as an alternative. The Carpenters and Harlem Prep didn't see Harlem Prep as being that for one because there were no public schools in central Harlem. So Harlem Prep was serving as the de facto public school in that community. There was a school in East Harlem, yes, and there were some private schools, but in central Harlem, there were no public schools, or public high schools, excuse me, in central Harlem. And so the Carpenters, the leaders of Harlem Prep wanted to, you know, be that public institution. And so in a sense it's purpose was different in terms of eventually becoming a public institution and acting as one.

[Does something else need to go here?]

Berkshire: Barry, I want you to talk some more about what was going on within the four walls of Harlem prep. It's leaders had many goals and a very distinct philosophy. And I want you to tell us more about both. But first we're going to listen in on some of Harlem Prep's students talking about how they understood what the school was trying to do.

[Excerpt from Harlem Prep, Step by Step]

Goldenberg: Ed Carpenter, the headmaster, used to say "our students are learning that we all are flowers on one universal garden and we were all tied together on a universal basis by strong silver thread of love." I love that quote. But that principle of unity, that belief that we're all in this together. Those were the, you know, large principles. And then on a more practical level, there's kind of three more themes to the school. One was focused on academic success and achievement. That was their utmost goal, it was to send students to college, have them succeed in whatever that may entail for their lives. Giving back to the community, creating community, that was also a principal. And then again, thinking of like their context, internalizing black pride and black culture and exploration of blackness, right?

Even though they believed in appreciation of all cultures and diversity there was a lot of Pan-Africanism happening in Harlem Prep and so that Harlem context was very, very real and very, very important as well. And so they were able to merge, merge kind of all those things together. As I've identified and, and you know, the community who've I've been able to speak with for all these years have identified for me and explained to me all of those things kind of merge together into this school. And so obviously you have those broad principles. It was really

up to the teachers and the students and administrators to kind of do their own thing to make each of those things happen.

Berkshire: So Barry, I've been listening to a fantastic new podcast series called School Colors. It's a project or Brooklyn Deep, and it chronicles the New York City teacher strike of 1968 and the intense divide between the mostly white unionized teaching force versus communities of color, the African American and Puerto Rican families whose kids attended the public schools, and all of that is happening at the exact same time that the Harlem Prep experiment is underway. And yet the story of what took place in that former grocery store in central Harlem feels so different from the bitter battle in Ocean-Hill Brownsville. I want to play a little clip from the documentary that I think really captures this contrast.

[Excerpt from Harlem Prep, Step by Step]

Goldenberg: There's obviously so much going on in New York City at the time. As you mentioned, the teacher strikes and parents and activists and community members, they're just frustrated, as they should be, with the public schools. And folks in Harlem wanted to do their own, do something different, right? There was a need to rethink education, to reimagine education in a powerful way. And they ended up kind of doing their own thing. And although all this turmoil is happening in Harlem—they were obviously connected. There was East Harlem these Harlem, right? And IS 201—but Harlem prep was something different. It's like 'you know, we need to do our own thing outside the system because the system isn't working for us. It hasn't worked. It's still not working and we have to show them what powerful, revolutionary, radical loving education could be like and how talented our young people are.'

Berkshire: Harlem Prep was entirely funded by private sources. That's another thing that makes this story so fascinating. And it also meant that school leaders were constantly on the search for funds. Here's Harlem Prep headmaster, Ken Carpenter, making a very direct fundraising pitch.

[Excerpt from Harlem Prep, Step by Step]

Berkshire: So when I was reading a piece that Barry wrote about Harlem prep and he mentioned how it was funded that they relied on both philanthropic and corporate donations.

Schneider: Yeah, I was also fascinated by that. And again, we see the importance of historical work in so far as it presents a reality to us that in many ways is incomprehensible from the present, right? It's impossible for us to imagine today a philanthropy giving money to a project that is not designed to scale. But here we see it and even though it's not designed to scale, we can also see so many potential uses of a project like this, right? First and foremost, it seems like it actually worked in the community, but beyond that it seems to offer lessons for other projects. Now will they be exactly the same? Probably not, but there's a lot to learn here about the importance of responding to community concerns about the kinds of pedagogical practices that educators engaged in that again, if not scalable, are still object lessons in how reform works or

doesn't. And so again, I think it's so interesting to see that foundations once upon a time were game for this sort of work. And I've really shied away from it in the past decade or two. And I think it's worth revisiting the question of, you know, is it worth funding something that is not designed to scale.

Berkshire: Barry, I'm curious about what you think when you look at the support that Harlem prep got from foundations and even from corporations. It's part of what makes the school story so interesting and it's also really hard to imagine that happening today.

Goldenberg: It was a different time, right? This was on the heels of the civil rights movement, a few years after the late 1960s. Right? There's the, you know, quote unquote frustration with the lack of progress and there was an interest in some of these foundations, led really by the Ford Foundation and McGeorge Bundy to try some of these experiments. And because he was a head of such, you know, this large foundation, other foundations were able to follow. That's kind of the smaller singular reason, but from a larger reason, yeah, the time was different. Right? There was, there was this moment where, again, this frustration was there and let's try something new. Let's not think about scale. Let's work in communities because communities are upset with us, us being the power players, right? The white elite in many ways. Right? And so there was that historical moment that led to an interest in this type of, you know, community action type of work as some, as some philanthropies termed it.

And there was also some for Harlem Prep specifically. They were so great at networking and finding foundation leaders of color in these different organizations who were from the community. There was, for example at Ford foundation there was a black program officer, we think the only one, who was there and that's who they connected with who was a big supporter of Harlem Prep and had um, spoke and that was relevant to other foundations as well. And there was this an interest in this type of experimental work for this short time.

Berkshire: Barry: part of what I loved about your research is that you show how the same debates we're having about education today, we're playing out back in Harlem Prep's day. What makes a school segregated? Who should get to run schools? And the leaders of Harlem Prep had a surprising take on both of those questions.

Goldenberg: The Carpenters and Harlem Prep didn't think of integration as having to be the goal in the first place. They believed in having a diverse school, preparing students for a diverse world, and having diversity within the black and brown experience. Students came from all over, with different economic backgrounds, although, you know, the majority were experiencing poverty. Most had been pushed out of education, but they didn't think about integration in that way. That wasn't the goal of the school. It was to prepare students and to have a diverse school and a diverse teaching force. But it wasn't to have 50% black students and 50% white students. They thought about having a multicultural school. Maybe that should be our goal. And it worked for them. And uh, that was one reason why I studied Harlem Prep because it was so different. It wasn't, the all, completely, you know, black schools of the South. It wasn't these integration

experiments in the North. It was something different. It had elements of both of those things. But it was this multicultural school where integration wasn't the goal, diversity was. What does, what does that look like within our primarily black community?

Berkshire: Every year, Harlem Prep celebrated graduation by holding the ceremony outside, right in the middle of Harlem. Here's a little taste of what those events were like from the documentary about Harlem Prep.

[Excerpt from Harlem Prep, Step by Step]

Berkshire: So Barry, these outdoor graduation ceremonies were so emblematic of the Harlem Prep experience. I want you to describe for us what we would have seen if we'd happened to have been walking down 126th Street on graduation day.

Goldenberg: One of the coolest, and I think most remarkable and beautiful things at Harlem Prep is their commencement ceremony, right? This ceremony was on the street, on the block, right outside in Harlem. And so I think that was very, very unique. And remember, these are students who've been pushed out of the public school system because they're students, mostly from Harlem, but also from throughout New York city and also parts of New Jersey who had been pushed out of their own schools and now they were succeeding at Harlem Prep. And that was something that Harlem Prep the school and of course the students were so proud of, that these are students doing amazing things. This is what powerful education looks like. These are how brilliant our young are that you've said are failures, but they're really incredible.

And so part of that ceremony was wanting the community to see, the world to literally see it, not just inside, but on the street. Right? And so if you walked up to this ceremony you'd see people peering in their apartment windows looking down, you'd see people, obviously in chairs, dressed up, and then you'd see standing room only people passing on the street. And it was just like this group celebration of these young people. It was Harlem Prep for reason. This was Harlem, this was our school. And everyone should be a part of the success of the students and the school itself.

Berkshire: That was Barry Goldenberg. He recently completed his PhD in history and education at Columbia University and is currently teaching at El Camino College in Torrance, California. If you want to know more about Harlem Prep, check out www.uncoverharlemprep.com. That's Barry's archival research project that has been bringing this school back to life with the help of Harlem Prep alumni. And congrats to Barry for also being the runner up in our first ever graduate student research contest. Speaking of which Jack and I will be right back with an exciting announcement about the next graduate student research contest.

[Music]

Berkshire: So Jack, you use that word scale a little bit ago and I was thinking about that when you think about how in a lot of ways Harlem Prep seems like a kind of ideal vision of a

standalone charter, right? It's like what we think about when we think about that, you know, the utopian days of the charter school movement when a hundred flowers were still blooming. But when you compare it to say, you know, there is a Harlem Prep school in New York today. It's part of a charter school chain called Democracy Prep that is seeking scale. Right? And in some ways those visions couldn't be more different.

Schneider: Yeah. In fact, if people google Harlem Prep, what they'll get is H P E S. dot. Democracy prep.org. And so you're right to point out the kind of inherent tension of visions here. And I think one of our goals this season on Have You Heard is to begin to add some more nuance to the charter school discussion. We've got several goals for this year, including, you know, maybe taking a more critical look at traditional public schools. But when we look at charter schools, there is something really interesting there about the kinds of freedoms that charter schools have to develop perhaps innovative practices or to give teachers more autonomy to shape the kinds of working conditions they have or the kinds of activity they're engaged in inside the classroom to empower communities. And we see that in many cases, those opportunities are not really leveraged in a way that responds to context or that really lives out this ideal of a kind of participatory democracy where people are getting to craft the vision of the school.

Instead, we've seen what I often describe as a monoculture where we see the replication of particular models over and over and over. And there are a lot of reasons for that. But I think that looking at a case like Barry's school, Harlem Prep, really reminds us that there are some things to like about the idea of a charter school or about the idea of a more autonomous, traditional public school. And of course in this case, Harlem Prep was actually an independent school. So, you know, resisting some of those labels and the kind of tired rhetoric that goes with each one can be also something that an historical work brings to the table.

Berkshire: So one thing that did kind of weigh on me as I learned more about Harlem Prep and got to know Barry's research is that I had to ask myself if I would be opposed to the creation of a school like that today. Would I be making the same arguments about, you know, would I be trashing it for having corporate funders? Would I be denouncing it for not being part of the traditional public school system? And you know, there were things that I really loved about it, but I don't have an answer for the rest of it.

Schneider: That's one of the things that I really loved about this study is that it doesn't offer neat and tidy solutions for us. Right? That we face so many dilemmas in education and dilemmas by definition can't be solved. Only problems can be solved. Dilemmas by contrast can only be managed. And we see so many dilemmas in education, right? For instance, what about the dilemma that we face with regard to teacher autonomy, that teachers need autonomy in order to respond to the unique needs and concerns of their students? In order to draw on their own particular expertise, in order to adapt flexibly to changing conditions in the classroom. And yet we also want some sort of basic guarantee of quality in the classroom, especially given the fact that when teachers shut their doors, we don't really know what's going on in there.

I think this is a great example, to draw on Barry's study for, because you know, in Barry's school, at Harlem Prep, there were no classroom doors to shut. They were all teaching inside a supermarket. And so we can see here, Oh my gosh, okay, here's one reason why it might have been perfectly appropriate for these teachers to have radical autonomy with regard to how they were teaching because there was also radical transparency. And I think the study speaks to the amazing contingency of education, right? That it all depends that, you know, how do we feel about a school having more autonomy? For instance, with regard to, I dunno, its scheduling, how long it runs, whether it goes in the summer, it kind of all depends. Right? And that's the story of Harlem Prep. It's a story of, you know, particular contingencies and the responses that people develop. And in many ways it's a story about how not scalable things that work are because they respond so neatly to a particular kind of context that they don't, they don't solve those problems, but they respond in a sensible way that seems to manage the dilemma in the particular way that it's manifesting.

Berkshire: Ladies and gentlemen: peak Jack Schneider.

Schneider: If people could have seen your face while I was talking... I had to not look at you so that I didn't get distracted.

Berkshire: I believe that expression is called sleepy. Well, I would imagine that there are listeners out there who also happen to be aspiring researchers, perhaps even education historians who are wondering, 'how can I get an A on this fun? How can I submit my research and possibly be chosen to star in an episode like Elise Castillo did and now Barry Goldenberg has done? And Jack, are you going to share that information with the world?

Schneider: Your segues are...

Berkshire: Remarkable?

Schneider: Are really good and I, I've got to say they're usually used to trot people over to the paywall and uh, I was still waiting for you to say like, if you want to actually hear about this...

Berkshire: You have to pay to enter!

Schneider: Yeah, we are going to run our Graduate Student Research Contest again. It was such a success, at least in our opinion last year; we had so many great entries. We learned so much and reading about people's research. We got to share that research at AERA and then on the podcast, that we're going to do it again. And so we are going to put up on the show's website, which is HaveYouHeardBlog.com so that's Have You Heard, the name of the show with the word blog after it all mashed into one word dot com, and if you visit that website you will be able to find the instructions for entering our Graduate Student Research Contest. They will be remarkably similar to last year's. So we'll just ask for a brief description of your research and

why you think it would be a good fit for our show. And then we'll put you through various rounds of a trial by fire until one or two people emerge victorious at the end and join us on the show.

Berkshire: Well, Jack, speaking of the paywall, I actually have a little treat for you.

Schneider: Is it, is it a Patreon membership?

Berkshire: Well, regular listeners probably know that in recent episodes, I have sprung one unpleasant surprise on you after another, and I have delighted in your lack of preparation. No more.

Schneider: Oh, you're going to ask me about something I know about this time.

Berkshire: I thought that for today's In the Weeds segment, that's the extended play version that we do for our Patreon subscribers. I thought we could talk about a topic that I happen to know is very near and dear to your heart.

Schneider: Would this be school quality?

Berkshire: A second topic. It's that huge overarching question: 'What are schools for?'

Schneider: Oh, this is great. Yeah, I'm very excited talking about that. There's a lot of work, you know, stretching back decades on this and a lot of my work these days is on that topic. So I will be joining you on this.

Berkshire: Well I got very interested as we learned about Harlem Prep and what it was for and how much bigger their vision was than the vision we're used to hearing about today. So that's what we're going to be talking about In the Weeds. If you want to join us there, all you have to do is go to [Patreon.com](https://www.patreon.com) you'll see all the cool extras you can get just for kicking in a few extra dollars a month. That's what keeps the podcast going and enables us to pay our excellent producer.

Schneider: For those who want to show their support for the show outside the capitalist financial system. There are lots of ways to do that. The best I think is just to tell people about what we're doing. Let them know that you like listening to us. You can tweet about the podcast, you can include the podcast handle at, have you heard pod in those tweets. And you can go on and give us a rating wherever you get your podcasts. Right now, our ratings are pretty good, at least on iTunes. So wow, thanks folks. I don't know how many Patreon members we've got, but I'm the one who encourages people to give us ratings and it sounds like people are listening.

Berkshire: And of course, if you would like to become a Patreon subscriber, just go to [Patreon.com](https://www.patreon.com) and search for Have You Heard and you can join us In the Weeds. Until next time, I'm Jennifer Berkshire.

Schneider: And I'm Jack Schneider.

Berkshire: This is Have You Heard.