

#77 Equity in Theory, Privilege in Practice: Race and the Quest for "Good Schools"

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

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

**Berkshire:** And Jack, if I'm not mistaken, you are fresh back from hobnobbing with other education historians.

**Schneider:** I am so refreshed and jazz after that. Nothing like a conference gets me fired up. I feel like I have been bathed in the sentiments and wisdom of my people.

**Berkshire:** Well, I think I speak on behalf of our entire listening audience when I ask, are there actually a lot of you?

**Schneider:** There are so many of us, Jennifer, that we needed the largest conference hall available in the Hyatt Regency of Columbus, Ohio.

**Berkshire:** Well, Jack, welcome back. And as you know, I spend most of my time ordering books, asking you to read them.

**Schneider:** You mean asking for books and ordering me to read them.

**Berkshire:** Actually, it's actually a little bit more accurate. So I actually came across this book because I saw people raving about it on Twitter. It's called *White Kids: Growing Up with Privilege in a Racially Divided America*. It's by Margaret Hagerman. And I started reading it, and first, it's amazing. It's an ethnography and so she spends years following kids and parents around in a town that she doesn't identify. And we get to really listen in on their conversations about how they understand race, how they understand privilege and more importantly for where we're coming from, how all of this relates to the schools that they choose for their kids to attend. So Jack as I was reading this, I thought to myself, Jack has to read this and to this actually really relevant to Jack's work.

**Schneider:** Yeah, I'm excited to talk about this with Maggie Hagerman who is an assistant professor of sociology at Mississippi State University and whose ethnographic research really reveals, I think, more about schools and what we need to do to improve our schools than lots of the quantitative, ed policy research conducted by economists.

**Berkshire:** Take that data boyz!

**Schneider:** That is invoked. You know, there's a place for them too. But I think it's really important to carve out a place for all forms of scholarship and insight. And I just think that qualitative research like this is so often overlooked presently and can be so powerful in terms of

helping us understand what's going on in schools and communities and what can we do with the knowledge that we gained from that in order to improve the lives of young people.

**Berkshire:** Our guest today, Maggie Hagerman is an ethnographer, which means that her research is based on deep access into the lives of her subjects. Well here, I'll let her explain it.

**Margaret Hagerman:** This book is based off of two years of ethnographic research. I moved to a community that I was not from and I spent a lot of time with these 30 families with the parents and with the children. And so I have all kinds of rich details that I could share, from the line, the sidelines of soccer games and from babysitting and from driving children to school and so forth.

**Berkshire:** Now you know that on *Have You Heard* we are often raving about a book and *White Kids* is no exception. But the challenge we have here is that merely talking about the book doesn't do justice to its extraordinary richness - the sense that you get that you're right their listening in as parents and their kids talk about race in schools. So I asked Hagerman if she could bring to life one of the families she follows in the book.

**Hagerman:** There was one moment when I was sitting in a coffee shop with a 12 year old girl and her mom and I asked the 12 year old if she could think of an example of witnessing racism and this is what she said. She said yes, which I was surprised at. And then she said, 'I remember one time I was at a liquor store with my mom about a year ago and there were a bunch of black guys in front of us and only two of two of them out of the three or four I think had an ID. But they were obviously like 45 years old. But the guy wouldn't let them buy the bottle of liquor. They were like, Oh fine man. And then they left. And then my mom and I were there and she was getting her bottle of Merlot or whatever and the cashier didn't even ask her for an ID. She was just like, okay, you're done. And we went outside and heard the black men talking near their car about the cashier and calling her white trash and so on.'

And so what's interesting is that Meredith, this child's mother suddenly interrupts her kid's story and is like, honey, I think that, you know, when you buy something at the liquor store, all the people in your party have to show their ID. And then Meredith interrupts her mom and says, 'those guys were not even standing at the register and I was with you and I'm not 21' and then her mom rolls her eyes like, okay honey, if you say so. And so then you know the daughter storms off to the bathroom with her cell phone and she's mad. And so the mom tells me that, you know, this is just teenage antics. But what was so fascinating for me is that later when I was talking with the child about her mom, she told me that that moment for her really was an example of racism. And she says, sometimes my mom is racist and tries to pretend like she isn't. My mom just hates talking about that kind of stuff.

**Berkshire:** It turns out that a lot of the complicated attitudes that kids develop about race has to do with schools. Their understanding of where they go to school, where their schools are located, who their classmates are, and who they don't go to school with.

**Hagerman:** What I try to map out in this are the differences between these groups of kids and these families and the ways that they're different are largely connected to the choices that parents have made about how to set up their child's social environment. And so that means things like what school to send their children to, what neighborhood to live in, what kinds of peer groups to have, what type of, you know, extracurricular activities to do, where to travel. And so I look at these sort of bundled choices, is how I describe it, because often, you know, as other research shows, the choice about where to live is often shaped by perceptions of the local schools.

And so I find that the parents in this book, although they are all similar in that they have been raised in class privilege, they make different decisions, they use their resources to make different decisions that create different environments that their kids are then interpreting. So Meredith very infrequently comes in contact with kids of color. Her teachers are all white, she has no black or brown soccer coaches or gymnastics coaches or anything like that. Her life is very much a sort of white bubble. And so I was actually very surprised when she was having that conversation with her mom. As I mentioned, it's very different than many of the other kids growing up in her neighborhood.

**Berkshire:** So Jack is someone who studies school quality and thinks a lot about how parents think about school quality. I kind of imagine that reading Hagerman's book was like listening in on conversations for you. And that maybe it wasn't the most pleasant experience.

**Schneider:** I had to keep a pillow nearby so then when I wanted to smash my head against the wall, I didn't do lasting damage to myself. You know, it's something that there actually is a small but a significant body of research on the way that white people use race as a proxy for school quality, which is not to say that they don't use race has a direct determinant as they're thinking about where they want to send their kids to school. There's some evidence that all racial groups do this, although white people tend to prefer significantly whiter schools than other racial groups will prefer in terms of an in group selection. But white families will also use race as an indicator, either consciously or subconsciously, as they're thinking about where the quote unquote good schools are. And then this, as we know, is further reinforced by existing accountability systems that tend to correlate pretty strongly with factors like family income, parental educational attainment, and, as a result of that, race.

**Berkshire:** A key part of Hagerman's argument is that children's attitudes about race are shaped in part by conversations among their parents and friends about schools and whether they're good or bad. The parents, she follows constantly about school quality and often in terms that are explicitly racial.

**Hagerman:** You know, parents are definitely thinking about race when they're making these decisions, but sometimes those conversations are happening between parents. And so I think that there's a lot of information about schools and the school's reputation and these notions of which school is the good school that are coming from the word of mouth, right? So parents are

talking to each other about where they're sending their kids and then parents are making these decisions that seem very individual, but I think are actually far more collective when you're thinking about like the collective of these white affluent parents in this community.

And so, yeah, I mean there were explicit examples in my research where parents were explicitly moving out of this city to live in a, you know, white suburb basically. And they talked about how, you know, they felt kind of bad about that in some ways, but in other ways they didn't care because, you know, their perception was that their child would get a better education at the suburban school.

What was so fascinating to me though is that when I looked at some of these metrics that people, I don't know if they use them or not, but they talk about a lot in terms of like test scores and college placement and those things. You know, these schools were actually comparable and the city school actually had far more AP offerings and these other things that, as problematic as they might be in different reasons for different reasons, these suburban parents were opting out of. And I talk about how that I think is because they say things like, you know, we wanted to live in this good community with a bunch of people like us, which is to me code for other white affluent families.

**Berkshire:** The parents who are choosing the quote unquote good suburban schools also see the schools as benefiting from that choice. Take a parent we meet early on in the book named Holly.

**Hagerman:** Yeah, she has high expectations of the schools that her kids are going to attend and she wants those schools to work for her basically. And so yeah, she thinks that, you know, my child is one of the kids that scores high on your standardized tests that are being, you know, given and that ups the average for the whole school. You know, this is...my daughter is a leader in the school. And so subsequently you need to, you know, the school needs to work for her.

I cite in the book actually some, a really great book called *Despite the Best Intentions* by Amanda Lewis and John Diamond. And they have this amazing quote that says "white middle class parents are not just advocating for their own children. They're also advocating for the maintenance of the structures of inequality that facilitate their advantage." And so when this mom is telling me that she's looking for a school that would work for her kids, you know, she's ultimately, you know, looking for a school that is functioning to provide her kids with what she wants for them. So in many ways it's about parents getting what they want, no matter the expense to everybody else.

**Berkshire:** So Jack, we just heard Maggie Hagerman giving this very vivid, granular example of a parent's transactional relationship with a school. And I, you know, I really had not, I hadn't seen this and so I found this really eyeopening, but the idea that you would expect the school to produce for you and that you would have a, you know, I almost want to use the expression *quid pro quo*. I want you to tell me more about this, not as Jack Schneider researcher, not as Jack Schneider education historian, but as someone who lives in a community that's rapidly gentrifying and where schools are a prime site of that gentrification. You must see exactly what she's talking about up close all the time. In fact, maybe you engage in that kind of behavior yourself.

**Schneider:** Shame on you, Jennifer. Well, you know, the first thing that I think about is the major problem that this poses for even integrated schools. One of the cases that I have made for integrated schools is that if you have the most powerful parents in a community involved in that school, that in advocating for their own kids, they will unintentionally advocate for all kids. That the way they bring resources to bear in that school is that their exertion of influence will end up bringing a greater opportunities for kids who wouldn't have experienced those opportunities had they not been in the same school as the children of those highly influential, powerful parents.

And here what we see is, well, maybe not so fast. Maybe, in fact, there are going to be parents who figure out how to advocate for their kids, how to secure resources for their kids in a way that doesn't really spill over to other kids. And that for me is the most disturbing part of this because I think we're finally getting some traction nationally, for the first time in a couple of decades around the importance of integrated schools. And to then begin thinking about, well, what are the ways that parents might work to even further exacerbate what we already see in terms of in school segregation and how might they, you know, justify that to themselves as being good parents and doing for their own kids? That to me is the most troubling piece.

**Berkshire:** The central paradox that Hagerman identifies in her book is that for these parents, quote unquote good parenting means giving their kids as many opportunities as they can, but being a good citizen means that they're supposed to resist taking advantage of structural privilege in ways that disadvantage others.

**Hagerman:** I call this the conundrum of privilege because I really did find evidence that parents felt as if they were having to choose between being a good parent or being a good citizen. I want to state really clearly that I don't think these two things have to be different, but for many of the parents they were. And then particularly talking about the folks in my research who identified as being politically progressive and anti-racist, even in some cases. And so on the one hand, you know, these parents told me that they wanted to be good citizens and raise kids who rejected racism and, you know, they were, they were deeply, deeply committed to challenging inequality. But on the other hand, you know, these are parents that have a lot of resources and we have this collectively agreed upon idea that being a good parent means providing the best opportunities that you can for your child and by best opportunities often times people think that

things think that that means, you know, getting them into, you know, basically hoarding opportunities for their kids. You know, systematically helping their children. You know, finding opportunities at the expense of other groups of children.

And so I think they're faced with having to make these difficult decisions. Like for example, you know, do they hire a private tutor to help their kid despite their commitment to public education? You know, and that commitment to public education is often 'I want everything to be equal.' You know, 'I support this because I think all kids in America should go to the same kind of school.' And yet they're giving their kids, you know, extra schooling through this private tutoring. Or whether to, you know, sign their kid up for an exclusive summer program and then make sure that they get in by calling their friend who, you know, was on the board of whatever.

So, you know, I think often times in these moments, parents end up making decisions that put their own child ultimately in a more advantageous position than other kids. And so my major overarching argument in the book is that this ultimately reproduces, you know, the unfair advantages and the unequal way that our society is organized. And what's so funny is that this is like exactly what they say they want to overcome. And so I try to draw out this conundrum or this sort of tension that they experienced between being a parent and a good citizen.

**Berkshire:** We just heard Maggie Hagerman talking about this paradox between what she refers to as the good citizen versus the good parent that that parents want to raise kids that are going to contribute in some meaningful way and be good people, right? They don't want to raise jerks. But on the other hand, they feel unbelievable pressure now to just pour every single resource imaginable into their kids so that their kids will succeed so that their kids will do as well as they've done or better and that they won't fall out of the class. And I feel like just in the last couple of years, you see all sorts of sort of interesting research and perspective on this very question, right? Whether it's people talking about opportunity hoarding or just the understanding of how inequality works on the kind of, you know, like basic day to day life decisions that people make.

**Schneider:** We've talked about this on the show previously as a tension between public goods and private goods, that there is a return to the body politic in sending your kid to a diverse school. There are lots of benefits for everybody in that. Whereas opportunity hoarding is something that benefits only the individual family and actually comes at the expense of other people. And I think one critical element that I want to add to this is this pervasive myth of schools as engines of meritocracy. And that we really saw that develop across the latter part of the 20th century. As more opportunities opened to people, there was a rise in competitiveness over schooling because suddenly more people had access to it. And this myth that education was the thing that distinguished winners from losers is something that we continue to be haunted by.

And it's something that people buy into so thoroughly that they believe they will actually be engaging in parental malpractice if they aren't securing every possible educational advantage

for their kids. And I think what we actually see is not only do they end up hurting all the kids who aren't getting those same opportunities, in many cases, they end up hurting their own kids as well. We've seen skyrocketing rates of stress and burnout in high-income schools. We have seen declining levels of engagement in high-income schools. There is also a concern about more privileged kids from this latest generation, the millennials who are graduating from school with every possible credential and then not really having a clear sense of what they want to do or what all of the weeping and gnashing of teeth was all about. So I think it's really important to step back and think about what are the things that truly benefit young people, not only in terms of thinking about all kids, but even just selfishly thinking about our own kids. Is this sort of tooth and nail competition for status and advantage actually even serving the kids who it is designed to serve.

**Berkshire:** Hagerman had a chance to return to the city where she did her ethnographic research four years after she finished. And what she found was pretty disturbing. The students racial attitudes, which she'd observed beginning to take shape had solidified into racial ideologies by the time they reached high school.

**Hagerman:** Yeah. You know, it was so fascinating to go back and talk to some of the kids again, high school students, and I talk about that and the very end of the book. You know, it was very interesting to me to see, as you said, that their ideas really had solidified. And they really had become much more polarized from one another, like these groups of kids. And it's hard to know if that's because of the current political climate or the kind of unfolded in between, you know, my first point of data collection and my second or if that's like connected to, you know, a developmental process of kids figuring out their, their political views as they get older and that kind of thing. But it was very interesting. And as I write about in the book, there was the devastating tragedy of black teenager was killed by a police officer in one of the communities that I studied and one of the neighborhoods.

And so I did talk to the kids and it was very interesting to hear it's sort of their different takes on that tragedy. And so I guess if there's any hope, there was one example of a student, a young person that was telling me about participating in some of the activism around this. And she explicitly told me that when she participated in a walkout that her school had, the students at her school had organized, she purposely stood at the back of it so that she could let her...so that she said that she was not like making it about her, that she was there to support her friends who had put the walkout together, who were black and that she didn't want to make this about her. And I thought that that was just, you know...I was surprised to see that from or hear that from such a young person given some of the things that some of her peers had been telling me. You know? So yeah, there's a lot to think about with that, as being an ethnographer and trying to navigate this. I mean, it's hard to navigate your emotions in the field no matter what. But I think especially around working with young people as they're trying to figure things out,

**Berkshire:** It's impossible to read Hagerman's book without being forced to confront a really uncomfortable question. Public education is supposed to be the great equalizer, but what if it's

doing the opposite? Making racial and class divides even deeper? We put that question to Hagerman

**Hagerman:** Well, it's funny you ask me that because that's literally the core course question for my sociology of education class that I'm teaching, right now to my undergraduate college students. This question of, you know, are our schools ultimately about, you know, reproducing inequality. You know, we often think that schools are this great place where everyone can go and, and they can work hard. And, you know, those that work hardest will be, you know, the highest achieving and can go on to college, whatever college they want. And, you know, this whole narrative about the American dream and, and hard work and meritocracy. Or our schools simply reproducing forms of inequality and hierarchies that have long existed. And I think that there are many, many, many studies that as, as I'm sure you know better than me, that really document the ways that the institution of education is actually reproducing all kinds of inequality, um, despite what we, you know, despite our sort of ideals about what it might look like. So those are the thoughts that come to mind, at least at first,

**Berkshire:** As you can probably tell from this episode, Jack and I are both huge fans of Hagerman's book. I hope you'll buy it. And read it. In the meantime, we wanted to know what she's got planned for her next project.

**Hagerman:** My new project is a study in which I am trying to understand the ways that racial socialization and political socialization are linked together, maybe in some ways, and so I am doing research with kids in both Mississippi and in Massachusetts. I'm looking at how middle school kids today, in this exact moment, are thinking about racism in the era of Trump and sort of how their ideas about racism are connected to the current political moment, but also geographic region and where they're growing up and how they're thinking about things. So I'm still in the earliest stages, but I have interviewed some children and it's, yeah, it's really rich data.

**Berkshire:** That was Maggie Hagerman. She's an assistant professor of sociology at Mississippi State and the author of *White Kids: Growing Up with Privilege in a Racially Divided America*. You should definitely read it. And Jack and I will be right back.

[Music]

**Berkshire:** So Jack, so much of what Hagerman was just talking about had to do with how these students perceived the schools that they attended versus the other schools. They had a whole elaborate lexicon for talking about schools, which were the good ones, which were the bad ones. Reading this made me kind of sad, but then I thought, wow, Jack's work is actually kind of relevant!

**Schneider:** Take the word actually out when you edit this Jennifer. What we see is that existing measurement systems do very little to disrupt the way that race and class shape people's

interpretations of where good schools. You know, one of the big problems here is that schools are not like, let's say a sandwich where you take a bite and you know, if you like it or not, uh, or like a pair of jeans where if you know what your size is, it's going to be relatively easy to find something that you like with schools you often don't know for a long time after sending your kid there. It's something that you need to experience. And as a result of that it's really hard for people to understand without sending their kids there where the good and bad schools are. As a result, they often fall back on status ideology - well, where do the most powerful people send their kids? - and use that as a proxy and of course in a country with a very troubling history around race and high levels of inequality. We can see that people when they are looking around for the schools that are the best schools oftentimes decide that the schools that must be the best schools must be the places where the middle-class and affluent white kids are.

And when they look at data systems and they see that those are the schools with the highest standardized test scores and we are pervasively told that that is a good indicator of school quality, we really rigidified these problematic views of schools. And you know, Maggie Hagerman is talking primarily about race. And so we'll just say that it rigidified a racialized view of school quality. And I think that it's really important then to step back and think about our measurements, not as an ostensible act of objective quantification, but as a potential lever for racial and economic justice, a potential lever for helping people see that actually many of those schools that serve historically marginalized populations are really good schools in some cases, even better schools.

They just happened to not have many of the outward indicators that people take as signifiers of school quality. And if we could signal that more strongly than it might do a great deal to advance the aims of economic and racial integration in our schools, it might do a great deal too. And the kinds of pervasive attacks and assaults we see on schools serving historically marginalized kids and enable those schools to, instead of always reacting and responding to reforms coming down the pike in a top down fashion, to intervention after intervention to be able to actually systematically improve their schools and respond to community concerns.

**Berkshire:** Well, Hagerman is an ethnographer, which is now officially the career that I wish I had pursued in lieu of whatever it is I actually did pursue. So the way that that her ethnography worked, we don't know where she went. We can guess.

**Schneider:** People can't see you winking as you say that.

**Berkshire:** Well this is all in an elaborate buildup, Jack, to put you on the spot because as I was reading the book, I was wondering, well gee, I know somebody who's been actively working on building a better measure of school quality. What if this had been in place in the community where she went? Would it have looked any different? And I'm just wondering what you think. Like do you feel like the work you're doing has the potential to disrupt the kind of corrosive forces that she documents or do you just feel like, you know what, it's pretty hopeless?

**Schneider:** No, I will play the role of optimist today and say that, you know, if you give people better measures of school quality, if you created, let's say, a data system that measured all the things we care about in schools, not just standardized test scores, but things like how engaged kids are, how much they value learning, how safe they feel, how strong their relationships with their teachers are. And you did that in a way that was not biased against schools serving historically marginalized populations. I think that it would do a great deal to disrupt the narratives that exist in America around good and bad schools, but it certainly wouldn't do so immediately that it would have to be coupled with people who essentially play the role of activists and advocates. They would use that as evidence in anti-racist arguments about where good and bad schools are.

You know, this is ultimately a fight that is going to be decided not by data systems, but by the stories that we tell ourselves and the stories that we believe. Ultimately those stories are the most powerful way to disrupt these narratives. About school quality. And I think that those narratives are so thinly rooted that there really isn't strong evidence that people can point to when they say that, you know, the best schools are in the most affluent neighborhoods. And so often it's just a matter of simply asking people questions about how they know what they know, um, that, that really the emperor has no clothes here. And that this is a conversation that I really hope we begin to have on a more systematic basis on a national level because I think it could make a great deal of difference to kids.

**Berkshire:** So Jack, other than going back and reliving my life and becoming an ethnographer, do you know what my other fondest dream is right now?

um, to, to be the nation's storyteller in chief in order to help people, uh, tell better fairer stories about schools and school quality?

**Berkshire:** I hadn't thought of it in those terms, but right. I wouldn't mind doing that. Actually. my dream...

**Schneider:** Race car driver!

**Berkshire:** My dream is that you would have to read an ad for an ed tech company in the podcast voice, the way that all the cool kid podcasts.

**Schneider:** Do you mean like when Malcolm Gladwell just seamlessly begins shilling for some company, you know, speaking of which Jennifer, these pants that I'm wearing, they just fit so great right now.

**Berkshire:** And those funny Silicon Valley shoes you're wearing look really great too.

**Schneider:** Well, they've got a microchip embedded in them that actually make me smarter.

**Berkshire:** Well, unfortunately we don't have any ads to read, so that means that for now we're making our traditional approach to the paywall.

**Schneider:** Really well done.

**Berkshire:** As listeners know, we rely on your support to keep the podcast going. All you have to do is go to [Patreon.com/HaveYouHeardPod](https://Patreon.com/HaveYouHeardPod) and you'll see all the ways that you can support us just for a few dollars a month and get cool extras like a reading list and a special behind the scenes area that we like to call In the Weeds. Jack and I go there after each episode and we hold forth on some, on some topic that I come up with and then spring upon him. Jack, do you want to know what we're talking about today?

**Schneider:** No, I don't. We'll just do that In the Weeds where people can, people will have to pay for my embarrassment.

**Berkshire:** People are going to be really interested in this. So last time we talked about why there was such acrimony between the Sanders and Warren camp over education. And I thought, you know, that was really fun and people really liked that. So let's keep our 2020 theme alive and our topic today is what in the world is going on with the schools in South Bend, Indiana, home to mayor Pete.

**Schneider:** Terrific. Well those of you who are instead channeling your resources to the causes of racial justice and economic equality, good on you and we don't need your money if that's how you're spending it. Please share the podcast with your friends. Go on, give us a rating wherever you get your podcast. It helps people find the show. And you can also go on to Twitter and tweet about the show and tag the handle [@HaveYouHeardPod](https://twitter.com/HaveYouHeardPod).

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

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

**Berkshire:** This is Have You Heard.

**Hagerman:**

**Berkshire:**

**Schneider:**

**Hagerman:**

