

#102: Politics in the Zoom Room

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

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

**Berkshire** And I want to kick off this episode by giving our listeners a little advice. If you happen to say co-host a podcast with someone and you also co-author a book with them, do not also engage in daily competitions to solve a certain New York times word find puzzle known as the Spelling Bee.

**Schneider** Because you will lose! Should we tell people what the show today is Jennifer, or do you, or do we just want to gripe about the Spelling Bee?

**Berkshire** I suppose we can tell people what the show is about. So Jack, you and I have been doing all sorts of interviews to promote our new book, *A Wolf at the Schoolhouse Door*. And one thing that's been really great is that we've been talking to people who are not education experts. And I thought that it was really interesting that a couple of people asked us the same question. What do you say when you hear that public schools are indoctrinating our kids?

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**Schneider** Yeah. And I actually didn't really know what to say. I hadn't really given it too much thought. In fact I sent an email to, I don't think I told you this, Jennifer, I sent an email to one of our guests on today's show because I didn't know that you had already reached out to him to interview him. So I emailed Jon Zimmerman and I said, Hey, John, quick question. What do you say to somebody who says that the schools are indoctrinating our kids? So I was so glad to see in my show notes that you had reached out to Jon because that was the starting point for me in terms of thinking through why is that such an American concern, right? You don't seem to be hearing that all over the globe all the time, the way it continues to pop up decade after decade here in the U S and you know, what is American about our ability to respond to that potential concern? And I think there's a lot there, right? That we live in a very decentralized country with regard to education structures. So there's an irony there to the fact that we often worry so much about schools, indoctrinating kids, and it turns out they aren't particularly well set up to do that.

**Berkshire** The other thing that makes this a particularly timely issue is that even just in the sort of weeks that I've been thinking about the episode and getting to work on it, you can feel the issue sort of pitching up in terms of temperature. Just a couple of weeks ago, the governor of Mississippi rolled out his proposed budget and off the table where the teacher pay increases that he ran on just a couple of years ago. And instead he wants to spend \$3 million on, wait for it, patriotic education.

And the idea is that it will inoculate students against leftist indoctrination, into socialist ideas in the schools. And I thought, you know, like, wow, you know, this is, this is really ominous. It's a sign of where we are, that whether you're, you're looking at things like that, or Arkansas' Tom

Cotton railing against the way Thanksgiving is taught in the schools, that this is a theme for our time. And we need to be prepared to think about what it means and how to respond to it.

**Schneider** And again, it's important to maintain some sort of historical perspective on this because it's not a particularly new concern here. The most obvious example from the past, maybe from the cold war, where fears of teachers sympathizing with the communist party and indoctrinating young people to you know, to love Bolshevism and to be loyal to the Soviet union were very real fears. I mean, they were founded in ideas that didn't have a particularly strong evidentiary base that, you know, the threats were more real inside the minds of members of the John Birch Society than they were inside classrooms. But they nevertheless had an impact you know, a big impact politically actually because those fears were used as a way of you know, stoking political activity.

And we see the same today. We see that people on the right are worried that if anybody learns anything, even remotely critical of the United States that they will hate America. And those on the left are concerned that young people are being taught a sort of blind patriotism that will lead to the perpetuation of racial and economic inequality. So you know, it'll be interesting to talk about this with an educator and with a historian of education.

**Berkshire** Well, let's do that, shall we? Our first guest is Christina Torres. She's an 8th grade English teacher in Honolulu, Hawaii and she also happens to write an excellent column for EdWeek Magazine. And a few months ago she encountered another EdWeek column in which a conservative activist named Julie Gunlock railed against the incursion of politics into schools after seeing a Black Lives Matter sign in her son's Zoom room. And Christina had an immediate and strong reaction.

**Christina Torres** I had a few reactions, one, I was also surprised at how sort of tone deaf it was considering everything we are just kind of coming to end of a summer with what some people were calling a national reckoning with race, but something that's sort of finally made it to a national stage and it's happening on like, you know, local television and things like that. And so we've been having these discussions about the Black Lives Matter movement. And so I opened up the piece and it just felt like this really shallow look at what it is that teachers do in the classroom. And in some ways it was both surprising and not, it was surprising that this was still being said. It was surprising that we were still sort of hearing the teachers. Why can't you just teach reading and writing and arithmetic the really old narrative, right? Teachers stay in your lane. And then at the same time it was unsurprising just because that's been such a common refrain from certain groups of people, for generations that teach it, teachers need to be objective teachers shouldn't bring in their politics.

**Berkshire** EdWeek asked Christina to write a response. Which she did. It's called An Open Letter to a Parent Afraid of Anti-Racist Education. It's excellent and you should read it. She writes that quote "because race plays a role in everything from housing issues to the environment to the books we read, we can't teach students about the world without including race."

**Torres** It's never about wanting to indoctrinate children. It's about understanding that the world is inherently political. And if I don't give my kids language to understand and process than I am doing them a disservice.

**Berkshire** As I mentioned, Christina teaches 8th grade English. And her students recently read that middle school staple, *To Kill a Mockingbird*. Trying to teach a novel like that without including race is unthinkable to her.

**Torres** If I'm going to try and teach *To Kill a Mockingbird*, which is written by a white woman in the South and is, you know, has its issues, I am going to try and teach it through as critical and revolutionary a lens as I can. So the guiding questions that I have my students think about as we read and the guiding questions for me, as I make assignments for, *To Kill a Mockingbird* is who is telling this story whose voices are missing from this story. And like, who has power based on who's telling it, and whose voices are missing? Like who does that serve? So my students and I talk about the white savior narrative, they talk about privilege. We talk about, you know, Calpurnia and this character Lula, who's very much this trope of the angry black woman in the book. And we talk about what is the unnamed anger that Scout kind of ignores, and is that anger justified?

You know, what is the history of that anger? We've had a lot of historical context on the novel too, as far as like what was shaping this story and these perceptions as it was happening. And how is that relevant today? You know, even looking at the movie, my kids, I had my kids watch the movie. And we talk about in the book, Tom Robinson is shot 16 times and Atticus even says they didn't have to shoot him that much. And my kids make a lot of ties with that and police brutality and the movie he's accidentally killed, he's trying to run away. And they tried to shoot to hit him in the leg and they missed. And my kids, a lot of them were able to pick on, they were like, Oh, it's cause they didn't want to upset white audiences. But those are the kinds of conversations that we're having as far as just questioning who is in power, who gets to critique stories and know who is shaping the story that shaped our own perceptions of the world.

**Berkshire** So Jack, I want to bring you back in here. When you hear people raising the alarm about politics in schools, like the conservative activist that Christina responded to, they often paint a picture of public education as a kind of seamless machine. But when you really think about it, the decentralized nature of education in this country actually makes it a really inefficient vehicle for indoctrinating students.

**Schneider** If we just look at how schools are organized in this country, we can see that they really aren't set up in a particularly efficient fashion for indoctrinating kids. That state standards are adopted at the state level rather than the federal level, the national level. But that those standards are just that they aren't a curriculum. That happens at the district level. And there are 13,000 school districts in the United States. So for a potential indoctrinate or that's going to take a lot of coordination. And then in terms of instruction that happens differently inside every classroom. So we're talking about 98,000 schools and three and a half million teachers who

you've got to try to control in terms of the way they interpret their curriculum. On top of all of that we have the fact that textbooks and other curricular materials are generally produced by third parties.

And even though there's been a lot of centralization there, that still leaves yet another party that you would have to co-opt if you were trying to indoctrinate America's youth. So I, you know, I think the way that we should look at this is that if we wanted to try to brainwash kids, we would have a lot of work to do in terms of trying to align this system. And you know, that's, that's, that's bad if we do want to brainwash kids, but it's actually, this, this fragmentation is actually pretty good, if what we want is a system that's hard for a single person to control.

**Berkshire** Back to Christina. The volume may be turned up to high online, where the debate over politics in the classroom is loud and fraught. But Christina says that her interactions with parents in real life are fairly contention free. Something she's grateful for.

**Torres** I am really lucky in that I haven't had parents get upset about the fact that we're talking about these issues. I have occasionally had parents who, once we talk about it, I've had one or two parents kind of be like, I wish my kids, especially since I'm teaching eighth grade.. So I have parents kind of say like, I wish they didn't have to learn about things that were this sad. Admittedly, the, the two times I've heard that it has been white parents, which makes sense. Because frankly, like that was a discussion I had to have as a much younger kid. I can empathize with that is like, it is, it's hard for me sometimes to talk about these issues when I've taught sixth and seventh grade, because there is a part of you that wants to keep the innocence of kids, particularly in a place like Hawaii, where race and racial interaction looks really different. It is a much more mixed population. It is a much more integrated population. And so kids certainly don't see race in stark lines as when I taught on the mainland, in my experience there.

And so there is a part, a little part of you that wants to keep that for them, out of love almost. Like, 'Oh, I wish I didn't have to tell them all these things happen,' but at the end of the day, they need to know all these things happen. And I'd much rather I have that conversation with them in a really healthy way and support families, having those conversations in a really healthy way that not have that. So I've been lucky in that my school was really supportive, but I mean, I see that pushback online. When I write columns about this or what I talk about, what I do in my classroom, I get pushed back all the time. Why can't you just stick to the content matter? Why can't you just teach kids about reading? And it's, it's super frustrating.

**Berkshire** Christina is very aware of the different hats she wears. That her role as a guide to critical conversations in the classroom is very different from Christina the EdWeek columnist. And understanding the distinction between those two has been key for her.

**Torres** So when you're talking about it in the classroom, it's not, this is ms. Torres, his opinion. So you should all believe it. It's, here's what a lot of people think about this issue. Now, what do you think? And let's talk about what you think, and that leaves open a lot of room for, it's a much more about skills and giving kids a framework for understanding conversations than it is about. Here's my politics. And you need to believe it too. Versus I do think that's where some of the split comes in.

You know, what I write on EdWeek is very much my personal opinion to adults. And so for adults, I am pulling no punches for adults. I will call things racist and say, what you are doing is racist. I'm not going to do that with a 13 year old because that's unfair. That's and it's not necessarily true because sometimes while their actions or thoughts might be based in race or racism, you know, they're still forming in a lot of ways, they're impulsive, right? And I'm not saying they can't be racist, but I'm not going to name it in that, in that particular way, because I want them to come to those understandings on their own a lot of the time, unless it's like a safety issue or our kids are making like a direct comment to someone, you know? So I think some of it's a really fundamental misunderstanding of what education can be.

**Berkshire** We're going to hear more from Christina in a bit. But first it's time for a little historical context - oh yes, we have to do it. Hearing Christina talk about how pitched the online debate has gotten made us curious. It does seem like the accusations that schools are indoctrinating kids have amped up of late. But is what we're seeing and hearing unusual or even unprecedented? We reached out to friend of the show Jon Zimmerman. He's an education historian at University of Pennsylvania and the author of *The Case for Contention: Teaching Controversial Issues in American Schools*. And he says that we're right - all the calls for patriotic education are different. But that's not the whole story.

**Zimmerman** What's interesting to me though, frankly, is how much resistance those calls have generated. I don't think they've gotten as much traction as perhaps they might have been earlier eras. You know, there's no question that at the very end in some sort of hail mary, you know, he decided the 1619 project was a good way for him to try to create, use it as a negative reference to sort of reinforce the older patriotic narratives. But I didn't see it get as much traction frankly, as I would have expected. And that just might be because everyone's distracted by the pandemic.

**Berkshire** Jon says that there've been many times in American history when the fear that schools and their teachers were indoctrinating, young people was rampant. And it makes our current era of complaining about say the 16, 19 project or black lives matter content in a classroom.

**Zimmerman** There was an immensely popular set of textbooks by a fellow named Harold Rugg - RUGG - who was a professor at Teacher's College. Rugg was a New Dealer and a passionate one. And so, you know, in his textbooks you would find things like, 'well, there's still some nostalgic old timers who think that we should have a laissez faire capitalism, but most serious people understand that we need a collective organization economy like we're doing during the

New Deal. And you would have a photo display showing inequality. So here's one from the quote slums of the South side of Chicago. And here's an adjacent picture of the Gold Coast, you know, along Lake Michigan. What should America do about this inequality?

And these books had a really interesting trajectory. It was basically a flash and fizzle. They were immensely popular, but then conservatives started to mobilize against them saying that they were making people socialists and Harold Rugg, who was a critic of capitalism, made a huge amount of money on these books until he lost it. When they became this target, they were almost ubiquitous. And then they were almost entirely removed because in the late thirties, conservatives mobilized against them and said that they were communists, or were communist leaning. And remember, this was the era of the popular front and the American communist party was gaining some adherence. And so the books were attached to that.

**Berkshire** Turns out that conservatives railing against supposedly left wing indoctrination by the schools has been a consistent theme across the decades, but it hasn't always worked.

**Zimmerman** There was a set of, of textbooks by a guy named Frank Magruder - MAGRUDER - which had, I would say, a small "l" liberal and orientation. Nothing like Harold Rugg's books. They were books that praised the United Nations and also that kind of nascent civil rights efforts on the part of African-Americans. And what's interesting about that moment is that the right wing mobilized against these books, but unsuccessfully. They tried to depict the books as communist, when the books were just liberal. People like William F. Buckley spent a lot of time trying to persuade the public that the Magruder textbook was, you know, Soviet inspired and they really didn't get anywhere groups like the American Legion which had been aligned with the movement against the Rugg books. They started to say things like, you know, these, these attacks and Magruder is a really kind of out of align and sort of quantity fascists themselves.

**Berkshire** Of course there is something unique about our current moment. Because so many students are learning remotely, that means that parents can see what their kids are learning. And some of them - like the activist who wrote the EdWeek column that Christina responded to - are loudly objecting. Well, Zimmerman says that while the technology may be different, there's nothing new about parents raising the alarm about what their kids are being taught. And that's been a force for progress and for resisting progress.

**Zimmerman** But let's remember that it was just two, three years ago that an African-American mom in Texas opened up her kids textbook and found slaves described as workers and. And this person, she was just a citizen. She wasn't a historian or anyone with any quote, you know, special qualifications for this task, but she knew enough to know that this was highly distorted. Having a lot of eyeballs on the textbooks can cut any number of ways, right? It can, it can lead creationists to try to get rid of evolution related passengers, which it has over time, but it can also serve to remove like racist distortions from text books, which is, you know I'm exemplified in the story I just told. To me what that shows is that the lay pressure on the schools and the debate over the schools is fundamental to democracy. And it's also been at times something that has both distorted schools and corrected them, both of those things.

**Berkshire** So while the content that's at the heart of the current debate may be new, the debate itself is really really old.

**Zimmerman** The most important point is that schools are and remain far and away the most important public institution where we deliberate and decide what we want our kids to know and what we want them to be. And so they're always going to be the subject of debate because we don't agree on what our kids should know and what we want them to be.

**Berkshire** Back to Christina. That dynamic of deliberation and debate that we just heard about - well that's exactly what she's negotiating with her students and their parents. And it isn't easy.

**Torres** . I do not at all want to fight with parents or families about they feel is, is my responsibility in teaching their kids. That is not something, like 'forget parents. I don't care about what you want to talk about. This is what I'm going to talk about.' That is not how I want my classroom to be seen. And I, I personally, that is not a way in which I operate. I think though it has to be a conversation and I've been really lucky and all the parents in my, in my career of teaching, they've always been willing to have a conversation with me when they feel uncomfortable about what I am teaching or the way that I am teaching things. And those conversations have been huge because, you know, I'm not a parent yet. And so for me, that it is really important to get that understanding of where is this coming from? Where is this pushback coming from? Cause it really helps me shape the way, you know, because of that. I now have a conversation at the beginning of the book with parents about this is what I am teaching and why, which is not something I had thought to do because I just, I don't have that prior insight. And so I'm really grateful for that. Because I do think it's actually kind of helped make it a much smoother transition now, when I, when I teach those things and kids are bringing up those conversations at home.

**Berkshire** The occasion for this episode was, of course, a superheated online exchange about politics in the classroom. But listening to Christina talk about how she handles issues of race and gender and inequality with her students and their parents, what's so striking is how skilled she's become at turning what could be a fight into a conversation.

**Torres** So I really think that when we talk about discussing politics or using the framework of politics in the classroom, it's not something that has to be like teachers versus families. It's something that can really be done in conversation with, in partnership with family. So that, and I tell people, I tell families this, you know, at the end of the day, you are the one shaping your kids' values. That is not my job. You are the one that's going to have those conversations. All I'm trying to do is give them information and critical thinking skills. And so I really think that it can be a really powerful and beautiful partnership. And some of that though is starting to work through this polarization that I really hope, I really hope our country can start moving best.

**Berkshire** A big thanks to our special guests, educator Christina Torres and historian Jon Zimmerman. And Jack and I will be right back with some insights about why what could have been a feel bad story is actually pretty inspiring. We'll also be revealing the subject of this

episode's In the Weeds segment for our Patreon supporters. Here's a hint: the school ratings juggernaut known as Great Schools may be involved.

**Berkshire** So Jack, I have to admit that I did not approach this episode with great enthusiasm. In fact, I approached it with a certain amount of dread.

**Schneider** You did? Why?

**Berkshire** Well, I know this is obvious to the world, but people online can be really mean, and it seems like debate just shuts down.

**Schneider** I'm gonna interrupt here and say like you have the thickest skin of anybody. I know. So hearing you say that actually makes me feel like it's a really scary place out there on the internet, Jennifer. Sorry, go ahead.

**Berkshire** When I saw this, you know, EdWeek column and how Christina responded, I knew that it was something that I wanted to learn more about, but then finding out that, in fact, you know, there's this sort of whole thoughtful process happening behind the scenes really inspired me. And then hearing from Jon Zimmerman about really what's this sort of like fundamental American push and pull, right? That you have all of these moments in time when parents sort of, you know, interfere in the workings of schools for good and ill. I feel like I have a much better context coming out of the episode than I did going into it.

**Schneider** Well, it's such an American story. I mean, it's an American story in that we keep having this conversation about fears of indoctrination, right? Like how American is that, that we are so paranoid about the apparatus of the state being deployed against us. That despite the fact that our schools remain mostly locally controlled which means that we control them, we are terrified of, you know, what they are going to do to us. This is, you know, something that we've spoken about many times on the show which can actually inhibit our efforts to improve education at least at scale.

But it's also such an American story because it's a story about how an institution has been intentionally designed to move very slowly to evolve very slowly to essentially check itself at every turn. So if we look at, you know, efforts to improve American education, even fairly straightforward ones, right? Like correcting the narrative around the civil war, for instance, right. There's an obvious one. And again, one we've talked about on the show that the reason why that happens so slowly and so frustratingly is the same reason why it would be very difficult for somebody like Donald Trump, for instance to make any long lasting impact on the curriculum via his 1776 commission that the schools are really resistant to that kind of drastic and rapid change.

**Berkshire** Well, Jack, I would imagine that to our vast listening audience, you sound as calm, cool and collected as ever, but I actually know you to be in a state of extreme agitation and it's

because of something that you encountered online. And you're actually proposing that we address this subject in our special segment for Patreon subscribers in the weeds.

**Schneider** Well, my frustration with Greatschools.org and its algorithm and the uses to which that algorithm is put is sort of ongoing and never ending, not necessarily an excuse to drag people, kicking and screaming to the paywall, but for those who do wish to join us In the Weeds, for our Patreon subscribers we'll be talking about what appears to be an effort by a court to use Greatschools.org ratings to deny her custody of her children because her children if in her custody would go to quote unquote bad schools.

But before we talk about that, let me just remind people that there are lots of ways to support the show without opening their wallets, purses and pocketbooks. My favorite is when people share the show with friends and colleagues, let them know what their favorite episodes are and that they enjoy listening. You can also give us a rating wherever you download your podcasts, iTunes, Stitcher, wherever that helps people find the show. And we always enjoy when you engage with the show's Twitter handle at, have you heard pod, we've gotten some great ideas for episodes from you that way. And it's also just nice to know that you're out there listening

**Berkshire** Well for people who do want to take the leap over the paywall, we actually have a special offer this week, Jack. I don't know if you've noticed, but the release of our new book has me feeling quite edupreneurial.

**Schneider** Oh God, I'm just going to go into hiding what you do this stuff.

**Berkshire** So if you go to [Patreon.com/haveyouheardpodcast](https://patreon.com/haveyouheardpodcast) and you join us at the \$10 a month rate, we're going to send you a free copy of our book. That's a pretty good deal. And it's a limited time offer. So jump on that bandwagon now.

**Schneider** At least you did it quickly.

**Berkshire** I did do it quickly. So we, we offer all kinds of stuff. And the main thing is that you get to join Jack and I in a special place that we call In the Weeds. And that's actually where we're headed right now.

**Schneider** Well, on that note everybody else who won't be coming with us, it's been lovely as usual. Goodbye.

**Berkshire** I'm Jennifer Berkshire.

**Schneider** I'm Jack Schneider.

**Berkshire** This is Have You Heard.

