

#108 Kids as Customers

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

Jack Schneider And I'm Jack Schneider.

Berkshire One of the things that's so great about our podcast is how responsive we are to the needs and interest of our customers.

Schneider That's right. Well, that's really just because we live in fear of a one-star rating,

Berkshire So I'm actually a little bit serious. We get so much great feedback from people who follow us on Twitter and people who support us on Patreon. And today's episode is a perfect example of that. We heard from one of our Patreon subscribers. Her name is Sam Ellerbeck and she had a question and it inspired an entire episode. Jack, would you like to hear the question?

Schneider You, you act like I don't know what it is, although I don't know the exact wording, but yes, Jennifer, please enlighten me.

Samantha Ellerbeck So my name is Samantha Ellerbeck and I am a first year PhD student at the University of Kansas and the Special Education Department. Because I am an avid listener of Have You Heard, you mentioned Jeff Bezos' Montessori-inspired schools at the end of one of your episodes. And I would just love to hear you talk more about that because I love Montessori and I taught at a Montessori school. I only got to stay there for a year, but it was incredible. But I'm concerned for two reasons. And the first is that I think that if you want every child to have a good education, then you have to invest in the public school system. And the second is that, that aside, I'm not sure what Jeff Bezos means by Montessori inspired and, you know, Montessori teachers all over the world will talk about following the child and Jeff Bezos talks about the child as the customer. And I think there's a disconnect there that I am worried about.

Schneider Yeah. When I heard Jeff Bezos used that language, it concerned me too. Not just because, you know, I think there is great potential in these models out there that create more space for creativity, not just by educators, but for kids. But also because I think that it's a sign of what is on the horizon in education. It's certainly a vision that is supported by the radical, right, as well as by moneyed interests like Amazon or Jeff Bezos as an individual. So it'll be interesting in this episode to talk, not just about this, but also about what Amazon suffocation means for education.

Berkshire OK - so you've heard the excellent question that prompted this episode. Now we need some answers. Fortunately I happen to have an expert on speed dial. Mira Debs is a friend of the show and the author of *Diverse Families, Desirable Schools: Public Montessori in the Era of School Choice*. Regular listeners may remember her from episode #64 *Different Strokes for Different Folks* about what parents from diverse backgrounds want from schools.

And after Jeff Bezos announced that he planned to make a massive donation to create a network of free Montessori-inspired preschools in underserved communities around the country, Mira responded with an op-ed in the New York Times. BREATHE. Jeff Bezos and the Trap of the Charitable-Industrial Complex. In other words, Mira is the perfect person to help us answer Sam's question. So I started out by asking her directly. Is Sam right to feel a little, well, concerned about Jeff Bezos' vision?

Mira Debs So is she right to be concerned about the language of customers? I think that wording definitely stood out to me when I read the initial announcement in 2019. As educators, we don't tend to think of our children as customers. We tend to think of them as individuals that we're developing, you know, citizens, community members. I think Bezos is somebody who's worked in the business industry. I think he views customers, not just as kind of passive recipients, but as innovators, as people who have helped him develop the business. So maybe that's where he's coming from with it, that you treat customers with the greatest level of respect in the same way that you would show respect for children. But I definitely see a way that it continues to view children and education as a marketplace, which I think is antithetical to a lot of the work of building a strong public education system.

Berkshire To understand why someone like Jeff Bezos would seize on the idea of creating his own network of Montessori schools, we are in need of some context. What IS Montessori exactly?

Debs For those who've never heard of it before, or have heard of it and have no idea what it is. Montessori is an educational approach that was developed in the early 1900's by Maria Montessori, who was an Italian doctor and educator. And she was pulled in to help a housing project for low income working families in one of the poorest neighborhoods in Rome, and to deal with kids who were not yet in school and were being left behind by their parents and kind of messing up the whole estate out of having a group of like 40 unruly kids. She used a process of observation and educational tools that she had developed for working with children with disabilities beforehand, to come up with this approach that ultimately became known as her method.

Berkshire A little more about the method. It looks very different from a traditional school. Back in the start-up phase of this podcast I spent a morning at a Montessori school in Washington DC with a co-host who wasn't Jack Schneider. As we hung out in the back of a classroom, kids of different ages would arrive and without anyone instructing them would just start doing stuff. Mira says that's really the whole point.

Debs And so what you'll see in a Montessori classroom, when you go in is this kind of surreal experience of 25 kids doing completely different things and not being controlled by a teacher. Oftentimes you have to look to find where the teacher is. And if a classroom is working really well, the kids have learned the routines in repertoires, even these three and four year olds and are practicing their work and they're moving around the classroom, they're taking breaks, they're going over to the snack area. So they're learning all these processes of experimentation and

emotional regulation that we know are really, really important for children's long-term academic and personal success.

Berkshire By the way, the school that I visited a few years ago was a public Montessori school - part of a vast network of tuition free schools attended by a diverse student population. It's also the part of the Montessori universe that Mira happens to be an expert in.

Debs One of the things that a lot of people don't know about the United States is that we have a public Montessori sector that has over 500 public schools. They're in states around the country. There's a map that you can find online on the Montessori census website. And it's over 125,000 students who are in public Montessori. It's the largest alternative pedagogy in the public sector. And a lot of those public Montessori schools were created as part of desegregation efforts in the 1960s and seventies. So they're in cities in both the North and South. In some cases, they're part of magnet programs. So they were created with the mission of being intentionally diverse schools. Overall, they support a majority of students of color. My research found it was about 54%. So it really contrasts that idea of Montessori as this white thing, some of the public Montessori programs stems directly out of the efforts of really visionary black, Latin X and indigenous educators and the 1960s.

Berkshire Now if you were paying close attention to Sam's question, you may recall that Jeff Bezos' description of children as customers was only one of the things that concerned her about his initiative. The phrase Montessori-inspired was also a red flag. And she's not alone in feeling that way.

Debs When Montessori educators hear the phrase "Montessori inspired," it makes their hackles go up. And part of that is that there has never been strict regulation about what it means to be Montessori and Maria Montessori herself was very careful to delineate what it meant to appropriately follow her method. But there were lots of people figured out that you could call something Montessori and people would think that it was special or elite, even if they weren't necessarily following it. So there's been a lot of work in the Montessori community to try to ensure that folks who call themselves Montessori are staying faithful to her ideas. And it's also a part of a challenge that we see every time we have some kind of progressive student centered school that it's really hard, even for people who want to do a good job of placing the students in charge of their education, that you keep getting pulled back to that what Tyack and Cuban called the traditional grammar of school.

Berkshire So Jack, I couldn't help, but take note just now that as mirror referenced the grammar of schooling, you lit up like a Montessori kid at snack time.

Schneider I love it. I'm so happy she did that. What do you want from me? You want me to talk about it? I'd be delighted.

Berkshire So I think that what we heard from Mira and also from Sam who asked the question, which inspired this episode is that this whole notion of Montessori-inspired really concerns them,

right? That, that they're worried that the things that can really make Montessori effective and even magical are going to get watered down, whether it's because Bezos wants to take this to scale or because he's going to be under a lot of pressure to prove that it quote unquote works. Right. And how do you prove that it quote unquote works without the grammar of schooling? So just quick refresh, what does it mean. Quick.

Schneider Okay. Quick. The grammar of schooling draws on the metaphor of language. And so just as grammar limits and shapes the way that we talk with each other or the way that we write. So does this basic form and function of school as we generally accepted. So we believe that school should look a particular way. We accept that schools should do particular things. If there is not one teacher in the front of the classroom standing, you know, more or less in front of a blackboard, we have questions about whether or not this is a real school, right? So these kinds of basic infrastructural elements and core cultural elements, really again, limit and constrain shape and give form to what can happen inside a school. So was that brief enough? Or I could go on if you want me to.

Berkshire No, that was nice and brief. In fact, I would like you to say a little more about why people who are excited about Montessori might be worried about the grammar of schooling.

Schneider Yeah. Right. I think then it's important to think about another phrase and that is regression to the mean, and so if we think about what something like Montessori as a model powerful it's that it is introducing elements into education right into the way school happens that are really outside of what we consider to be typical or normal in a school. Right. There's a lot of unstructured time. There's a lot of sort of trusting teachers and believing in the ability of kids to just generate interesting activities for themselves and to be creative. These kinds of practices are really reinforced or fostered by the existing nature and structure of school. And so what we would see if you try to do Montessori, like things inside a traditional school, what's going to happen is that you're going to regress towards the mean you are going to see less of these sort of atypical kinds of practices and outcomes.

And you're going to see much more of what we commonly see in school, right? And, and that's one of the positive things about our schools is that, you know, there is this kind of sameness in them. There's something actually really positive and worth celebrating about that. And then at the same time, there are also reasons to be concerned about how, if we aren't really thoughtful about how we do school, that ultimately everybody's going to end up kind of sandwiched in the middle with regard to the kinds of things they're doing. And we actually do want, in some ways there to be a lot of deviation from the mean, right. We do want kids to have different experiences that engage their unique talents and abilities that are allowing them to really explore their interests. And so that's a tension that we really ought to be focused on in education. We really ought to be thinking about, you know, how can we both create kinds of core, similar, common, equal experiences for kids and how can we open up opportunities for difference. And I think that, you know, that level of thoughtfulness is only going to come from really experienced, trained, thoughtful professional educators. It is not going to come from a top-down corporate approach.

Berkshire OK - back to Mira. Now that we know a little about the Montessori philosophy, let's talk about Jeff Bezos, shall we? Mira says that his interest in funding a network of free Montessori-inspired preschools is very likely a reflection of his own education.

Debs Bezos was interviewed by the national Montessori Life magazine in the early two thousands. So he describes at that point, his memory of the experience of going to preschool and also being really struck by seeing his niece go to a Montessori preschool. Those seem to have been really formative experiences for him. It's really interesting to note that some of the key folks who created startups, the two founders of Google, both went to Montessori schools as children. Some of the things that have made them successful in their businesses, this process of iteration and experimentation are really aligned with the way that children learn with Montessori.

And one really interesting detail, too, that I learned about Bezos was after he went to the Montessori school, he ended up at a magnet school in Houston. It was a school that had an early computer. He and a group of kids started hanging out after school and basically teaching themselves programming. So part of that was about being in a magnet school. But part of it was also this, this freedom that he had as a kid to work with a set of peers and do this process of self guided instruction and experimentation, all of which are really foundational to the Montessori approach.

Berkshire So as I was talking to Mira and reading more about Jeff Bezos's investment plan into these Montessori inspired schools, many red flags popped up for me and we've already, we've devoted a couple of episodes to exploring these. So I'm thinking about the one we did about sort of, you know, why do philanthropists so often get score form wrong, or the great episode we did with Anand Ghiridardas about the win-win philosophy and the whole idea that, you know, nobody needs to give up something like, say wealth, right? We can just have charter schools instead. But I come at this with a very particular red flag in mind, Jack, and I'm going to tell you about it now.

So you know how you have one job and I have many, many side hustles.

Schneider I actually don't describe myself as only having one job since this definitely does not fall within my prescribed university responsibilities. But yes, I, I, and I understand what you mean.

Berkshire One of my many side hustles right now is that I've been working with the Economic Policy Institute on this project to document the collapse of bargaining power that workers have on the job. I write these zesty little case studies. So it's this really inspiring project. And they brought together all these heavy hitters from economics and philosophy, but they need some way to make these problems real. So that's where I come in. I write about what's happening with like very specific workers, and over and over again, they involve workers at Amazon facilities

and you see the same issue arise again and again, and that is that Amazon exerts an extraordinary amount of control over the time and space of these workers.

So for example, when a pandemic hits, workers don't actually have time to take any of the mandated safety precautions because they'll get dinged by the algorithm, right? And so as I'm listening to Mira describe all the positive benefits of, of Montessori and why a Jeff Bezos might have been so inspired by them, including in his own life, I can't help, but think that this vision of kids, liberated kids, and then the, you know, adult world that's being constructed before our eyes, that, that involves a complete lack of autonomy and is really miserable... So I want you to just, you know, like, am I wrong? Am I exaggerating that like, are those things just completely irreconcilable?

Schneider Right? There's a real irony there that, you know, a company that is known for a, you know, really iron fisted leadership style would then be promoting a kind of schooling that is rooted in the professional judgment of educators, right? That is rooted in trust. Trust that professionals working with children will be able to design appropriate kinds of learning activities that will sufficiently engage young people and, you know, play up the kinds of unique talents and abilities that they've got that will help them realize their potential. That is a system that is, you know, completely unlike the system that has allowed Amazon to become an economic behemoth, right. There is no trust at the bottom of that system. In fact, there's the opposite of trust. If you read some of these exposes about what it's like to work inside an Amazon facility, right, workers are completely controlled, right?

There are these horror stories of not being able to take a bathroom break for instance, because they are wearing these tracking devices that will penalize them for using their time inefficiently. And so, yeah, I think that there's a real irony here, and it also points to the importance of a teacher professionalism, something that scholars and educators have been talking about for decades in which we've seen an erosion of over the past 10 to 20 years that if we are thinking about the best interests of young people inside schools, we ultimately need to think about a system in which we do have trust for the educators who are working with young people, because the kind of criticism that reformers often levy against the schools that they are factory like is in fact only true in so far as teachers have been deep professionalized and skilled and controlled through top-down corporate kinds of governance

Berkshire Back to Mira. But first a confession from your host. This is really the part of the story where I'm stuck. I can't get past the idea that the workplaces Jeff Bezos has created are the antithesis of the schools he now claims to want to create. My intransigent position wasn't helped by the way by a recent *New York Times Magazine* story that described another Amazon/school partnership, this one in California's Inland Empire. On the day the reporter visited, students were learning about Amazon's leadership principles and company mottos like "customer obsession" and "deliver results" were painted on the classroom wall.

So what does Mira make of the gap between Bezos' vision for learning and the workplaces he's given us?

Debs I'm thinking about, you know, some of the news stories that have come out about Amazon workers, not being allowed to take bathroom breaks and having to pee in bottles or workplace injuries that they've suffered back injuries in particular from having to lift heavy objects at really rapid rates. And I'm also thinking as well about the current drive that's being reported right now to create a union in Alabama, which is about a group of people who work for you saying that this is what we want to express our demands. And those are the kinds of things that you would see in a Montessori classroom, like children who are empowered to say, this is our experience, and this is how we want to be educated. So, you know, I can see a lot of parallels between those things.

Berkshire Now to that network that Jeff Bezos wants to create. While his announcement back in 2018 was full of the sort of Silicon Valley bluster we're so used to, the project has gotten off to a slow start. So far there is one Day One Academy open for business with another one in the works. Mira says that she's not surprised things are taking a while.

Debs Practically every place that I know that has started with big visions of creating fast growth of Montessori has ended up quite frustrated. Several charter management organizations... There was an experiment in Tulsa in the 1990s where they wanted to open like 60 public Montessori schools programs simultaneously. And it's really a model where you can't just add water and hope that it works. The two biggest challenges starting up, one is about accessing the materials. And then also teacher training, high quality teacher training takes about a year and it's often a parallel system to public school certification that also is costly and just takes a while. So I could see a space where Day One Academies could, could not only support their own schools, but could support other programs. And starting by that kind of startup support.

Berkshire By the way, the second Day One Academy location will partner with a public school system. Mira says that initially that struck her as a positive development. But then she got to thinking about where else that money could go.

Debs To some extent, when I read that announcement, I was like, Oh, that's great. They're partnering with public education. And they're building off the existing resources of a public education system. And then I had to think to myself, but we already do have free tuition pre-K for three and four year olds. That's called public preschool. And so, you know, rather than setting up this one particular site at one particular elementary school in Tacoma, like what are the ways that we could leverage this kind of money? And it's certainly not inconsiderable to lobby for the expansion of public pre-K around the country and to have more public Montessori pre-K systems, a huge issue across public Montessori schools is that the funding for pre-K is really inconsistent state by state.

Berkshire While I've been having trouble separating Bezos the employer from Bezos the philanthropist, Mira views his vision with a little more, well, nuance. She sees a whole range of ways that having the backing of someone as deep-pocketed as Jeff Bezos could be really beneficial. Not just for the expansion of Montessori but for the beleaguered US child care sector.

Her hope is that Day One Academies could change and adapt to meet the real needs of the moment, just like a certain company has done.

Debs Are there ways that they might give grants to folks who want to create Montessori programs in their own communities? We know that access to capital is a huge challenge for folks who want to start it. One of my friends in new Haven, who's starting the Sankofa learning center recently had a birthday fundraiser trying to raise \$8,000. There's a new Black Montessori education fund that's trying to help people with startups. Some kind of fund for others to start programs, getting involved in policy advocacy to support public pre-K programs, to support high wages for early childhood educators, offering subsidized childcare centers at their warehouse processing centers, paying those teachers the leading salary in the industry, you know, would, would change change the early childcare sector and would change the expectations for corporate America and also globally because they're a global company. So I see the potential for really powerful transformative impact for, for childcare and for working families as this process expands.

Berkshire When Mira's book on Public Montessori came out in 2019, an unexpected guest showed up at her book launch event. It was somebody from Jeff Bezo's Day One organization, wanting her input on the project. As you can probably tell from this episode, Mira had a lot of suggestions. But there was one at the very top of her list. Consider funding schools that are already doing great work - especially those that are at the forefront of a vibrant grassroots movement that is transforming Montessori.

Debs There has been a really exciting transformation happening in the Montessori community in the last five, six years. And a lot of it is happening in conjunction with a growing awareness around racial justice. And so I would say in the Montessori movement as a whole, there's a movement away from this kind of benevolent white people bringing Montessori to poor communities and a real assertion of voice and leadership by Montessori educators of color. There's a real change that's happening at the national level leadership. And there is incredible growth and dynamism among Black Montessori educators, Latinx, Montessori educators, and indigenous Montessori educators. There's a new indigenous Montessori Institute that was created about three years ago. So, so there's, there's just tons of stuff to mention and really great work happening.

Berkshire That was Mira Debs. She's the author of *Diverse Families, Desirable Schools: Public Montessori in the Era of School Choice*. It's an excellent book AND *Have You Heard* listeners can get 20% off if they order directly through Harvard Education Press. Just enter the discount code DFDS21. I'll also put that information in the show notes and on the blog. And Jack and I will be right back to discuss his secret Montessori past.

[Music]

Berkshire . So Jack, I have it on excellent authority that this topic that we've been discussing is actually one that, you know, a little bit more about than you let on. And that's because four year

old Jack Schneider, once donned a Montessori brand apron and got to work on that little rag pile, am I correct?

Schneider Yeah, that's that's right. It actually was my first traumatic schooling experience not attending a Montessori school, but leaving one because it was such a strange and magical little place. And then I landed in a school and, and boy was that different. And I think that that speaks to both the power and the peril of educational reform, right. That we can create schools that are these pretty powerful places for young people. And we are actually also able to turn those places into pretty uninspiring warehouses for young people.

And when I think about, you know, the future, as we are looking at it from the perspective of Amazon you know, building a chain of Montessori schools, I actually worry that the outward message will be one of this sort of progressivism in action, right? Learning by doing and experimentation and trusting educators and giving young people room to experiment and be creative and grow, but when in fact it will just be the opposite. This, a future that I think we are headed towards because of this long push towards privatization. And, you know, in this future that you and I envision in our book you know, there is rampant and unregulated marketing and you know, brands like Montessori will simply become taglines rather than actual indicators of what's really happening inside the school.

And, you know, increasingly they will be profit-making ventures that will, you know, need to not only market to parents, but sell them on something that they are getting out of the school. And of course the thing they'll be selling will be something related to results as measured by test scores or, you know, college acceptance rates, something that really doesn't jive with this notion of school as a kind of transformative place that really enriches the human experience. So I really worry about the future that this portends and again, I fear that the worst version of school will be driven forward while a message about, you know, essentially the best vision of school is publicly mouthed.

Berkshire Well, I just want to take this opportunity to thank Sam for posing a question that turned out to be such a fruitful topic of exploration for us. And I want to take this opportunity to thank all of our podcasts customers.

Schneider Oh, you, you never cease to amaze me, Jennifer, with your ability to pivot on a dime and transition into the the, the, the paywall.

Berkshire Well, like Jeff Bezos, I put the customer first.

Schneider Go on. Say, say, say the money words.

Berkshire Well, as our regular customers know, we rely on your support to keep the podcast going to pay our excellent producer. And we do that through patron.com. And if you're interested in becoming a supporter, all you have to do is go to patron.com/have you heard podcasts? You'll see a list of all of the cool extras you can get. We do a special area called in

the weeds. And this week, our topic is inspired by something that I heard Jack say this very week. He said that he regards the Biden administration's decision on standardized testing as quote, a big FU to kids.

Schneider Well, while that element of our discussion will live behind a paywall, our regular listeners know that Have You Heard is not just a product, it is a democratic community. And so if you want to continue this conversation with us online, you can engage the show's Twitter at, @haveyouheardpod. The Have You Heard mailbag is usually pretty fun for us to go through. Of course we also appreciate when you help others find the show. You can go on and give us a rating, make sure that you're subscribing to the show to get all recent episodes. And of course, my favorite way of spreading the word about the show is when you share your favorite episode, or maybe the latest episode with friends or coworkers, anybody who you think might appreciate it, or even in some cases might not appreciate it.

Berkshire Well, as Jeff Bezos knows so well, five stars are great, but it's really the click to buy, button that is the best way to show your love. And we still have our great special running that if you subscribe at the \$10 a month rate - Jack's rolling his eyes - we will send you an autographed copy of our new book, *A Wolf at the Schoolhouse Door*. I really feel like I'm getting this market thing down.

Schneider Well, if you don't want to do that, you can go get the book from your local independent bookseller, or even gasp the library

Berkshire On that note, I'm Jennifer Berkshire.

Schneider And I'm Jack Schneider.

Berkshire This is Have You Heard.

