

## #109 What They've Lost

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

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

**Berkshire** And Jack, I hope you're enjoying your vacation.

**Schneider** It's not a vacation, Jennifer. It's working from a different location.

**Berkshire** Well, from what it sounds like on my end, you're working in a remote location. That's deep, underground. Are you in a sensory deprivation tank?

**Schneider** I am. I brought my laptop into the saline solution with me because I find that podcasting has been very stressful for me. So this is a way to ease some of the burden.

**Berkshire** Well, I'll be easing some of the burden this episode by bringing in a whole bunch of people who are not you to really lead the way

**Schneider** Nobody asked for that, by the way. I mean, that's, that's, that's great, but I just, I don't want our listeners to be confused and to thinking that there has been outcry for less Jack

**Berkshire** Well, this episode was inspired by a gap and that would be the gap between the way policy makers talk about learning loss and Jack, just to see if you're on your toes, what is learning loss?

**Schneider** As those who use the phrase mean it it refers to a decline in the projected acquisition of academic content, knowledge and skill, right? So you could imagine a graph with a slope you know, tilting upwards towards content mastery. And that slope would not be quite as steep this year because of setbacks due to the pandemic. The difference between those two slopes would be the learning quote, unquote lost, even despite the fact that, you know, students won't exit schooling after this pandemic, knowing less than they did prior to it, it's referring to the difference between what they would have been projected to have learned as measured by standardized tests and what they actually will have learned.

**Berkshire** Well, Jack, I'm imagining this is going to come as a huge surprise to you, but well, not just that, but I think that a lot of students who've experienced a year of pandemic learning, much of it remote would have a really hard time recognizing their own experiences in that tortured explanation that you just provided of what they've lost.

**Schneider** Well, let's just be clear that I was only articulating on behalf of those who are obsessed with this phrase, what its meaning would be. I find it sort of insufferable and I'm really looking forward to hearing the students talk about it.

**Berkshire** I recently read a great piece in EdWeek by Boston middle school teacher Neema Avashia. It was about how the learning loss that policy makers keep talking about seems very distant from the way her students talk about what they've lost during this pandemic year. Fortunately for us I happen to know Neema - we've had her on the show before - and so I invited her to come onto Have You Heard and elaborate, and to bring a bunch of her students with her.

And as Neema explains, her impetus for really tuning into what her students have to say began last spring when almost over night she went from being a very confident social studies teacher to one who was suddenly struggling to connect.

**Neema Avashia** The spring was a pretty Royal failure for me as a teacher, I went from being fairly effective in person to largely ineffective online and that's cause I'd never done it before. Like I think all of us, we didn't really get any training. It was just like, here, go teach your class. But now it's on zoom. And that really didn't work and result of which was like engagement was really weak. So I started in the spring basically by running circles with my students, just to listen to them, to try to think about good questions that I could ask them and recognize that like they had a lot more to teach me. Then I had to teach them in this moment because I might know a lot about teaching in-person in school, but I know nothing about what it's like to be a student during a pandemic doing remote learning. And so the best thing I could do as a teacher was to shut up and give them time to talk and to use what they were saying to shape my practice.

**Berkshire** Neema encouraged her students to share what they were going through and what they've lost during the past year. And as they told her, they've lost a lot.

**Neema** What was coming out to me really clearly when I was listening to young people is that learning loss was very low on their list of losses and the kinds of losses that young people were talking about range from losing family members, to losing their housing, losing relationships with peers, losing connection to activities that they love doing sports arts. And ultimately like probably the most sort of gutting one was kids literally saying I've lost who I am. I've lost my sense of self, which makes sense to me as a person who works with adolescents, like so much of adolescent identity is social identity. They are who they are because of who they're with and because of what they're doing. And in the last year, they've lost all of the people they were with and they've lost all of the things that they were doing. And so I had young people saying like, I don't actually know who I am anymore. I've lost that.

**Berkshire** Now we're going to meet some of those students. First just a note on audio quality. We usually go to great lengths to try to make this show sound as good as it can. But unequal access to technology is a part of this story so I'm going to let you hear the students as I heard them.

[Students]

**Berkshire** We'll be hearing from lots more students, but I want to bring Neema Avashia back in. Neema one of the themes that is already emerging is this loss of connection that students feel now. A loss of connection with their teachers, and with one another. It's something you've been thinking about a lot. Talk a little about how remote learning has made the relational aspect of school so much harder.

**Neema** All these sort of like really nuanced ways in which relationships get built, don't happen. And you end up with relationships that are very like didactic or transactional, but not relational. And I think that young people have really felt that in terms of their relationships with one another also that having like an academic conversation without a relationship is very hard. It's very difficult to take those kinds of risks and put yourself out there. If you don't feel like you can trust the person who you're talking to. And if you've never seen the person who you're talking to, because people's internet is glitchy and they're not able to always have their cameras on and there's things going on around them. Like, so I haven't seen the person who I'm in a group with and I maybe don't even know what their voice sounds like. I'm not going to feel known or seen by them. And I'm probably not gonna be able to have a very strong learning relationship with them. Like all of that is very much a product of the sort of like challenging situation that we're in and points to. Like the number one thing we need to be thinking about as we come back together in person is like, how are we building relationships?

**Berkshire** Part of what I'm hoping to accomplish with this episode is to give listeners a three dimensional experience of what students are dealing with right now. Neema says that that's exactly what's missing from the conversations and debates that so many adults are having - especially those with the power to make policy.

**Neema** There's just like so many layers that young people are navigating that I think aren't totally seen, like how many different kinds of hard something can be. And I do think like that is, you know, obviously part of the rationale around like the push to reopen has been, I think some acknowledgement of those challenges. It just feels like the push to reopen isn't coupled with a push for increased support. And so it feels like the mentality as well. If you just reopened schools, it's going to solve everything. And I just feel like, well, no, we didn't have enough mental health supports for kids in schools prior to the pandemic. We didn't have enough academic supports for kids in schools prior to the pandemic. Like our schools have never been resourced in the way that they need to be to fully support kids. So they just say, well, you've experienced tremendous trauma. Our solution is just to reopen the school building and throw you in there with nothing additional, but we will give you some tests. It feels like it really is disconnected from the reality of what young people are experiencing.

[Students]

**Berkshire** Neema: One thing that really jumped out at me listening to these students from different Boston schools is that the stories they're telling about remote learning are more complicated than what I'm reading, say, in the Boston Globe. We can hear from their glitchy audio and the little siblings howling just off camera that this is not an ideal way to learn. And yet

I was really surprised by how many of them were able to point to something positive about the experience.

**Neema** Yeah. I mean, it's made me think a lot about the ways in which our schools are not always set up to support learning, right? So overstimulation is a huge thing for lots of kids. Our classes are really big in Boston. We have high school classes that the max is 31 and in middle school, it's 28. That's a lot of stimulation. If you're somebody who struggles with stimulation, that is a lot of people and a lot of distraction to navigate. I think about going back into schools with 28 students after being home alone during a pandemic. And I can't even imagine what that level of simulation is going to look like. So I think that has been a overwhelming thing that a lot of young people talk about young people in particular who struggled in school with focus or struggled with getting distracted and struggled with them getting into trouble because they were distracted or focus. A lot of them have said, this has actually helped me because there isn't that external stimulus, like I'm just able to focus on my learning.

**Berkshire** Neema says that this pause from schools they way they were has given students an opportunity to reflect on all the things that are wrong with our schools. And they're asking the same question that's on a lot of our minds right now: what are schools for?

**Neema** Our school days start at a time that is developmentally wildly inappropriate, but remote school has allowed us to change that and to push it and to say, we don't have to make you get up at five 30 in the morning to take two trains, to get to school in time for seven, 10 breakfast. We don't have to do that. I think there's a way in which this moment has revealed to kids. The ways in which our school system is really dehumanizing. Kids talked about being able to go to the bathroom when they want to. Instead of when they're told yes or no by an adult, they talk about being able to eat a snack. Like why are we controlling them? Why are schools places where you can't eat when you're hungry or why you can't go to the bathroom when you need to, or what we're telling you, what clothes you can and can't wear. I just think that young people have realized during this moment. And I would say I, as a teacher also have been thinking a lot about like, why are our schools set up this way? What is it for?

[Students]

**Berkshire** The last student to speak, Kymani James, is well known in Boston school circles by the way. He served as the student representative on the Boston School Committee and recently resigned over what he says is a persistent pattern of the committee, the school system and policy makers ignoring the voices of students. And he is not alone in feeling that way.

**Neema** Kids are asking for us to see them as full people and to build schools that hold their full selves. And that shouldn't be radical. But it unfortunately actually is because we haven't been doing that. We weren't doing that before the pandemic, when the commissioner says, we're going to return to pre pandemic schooling in September. Like I want to quit teaching when I hear that, because I don't want to go back to that. No educator or no child who has been in this moment thinks that going back to pre pandemic schooling is a good idea. Pre pandemic

schooling. Wasn't working for too many young people. That's not something we should return to. You should be Marie Kondo doing that thing, thinking it and saying goodbye and moving into something new that is about being human, taking care of each other as human beings. And knowing that like learning will happen if we start by taking care of young people. But if instead of taking care of them, our effort is to measure them and tell them that they are behind. I actually don't think learning will happen. I think that will be the most damaging thing we could do. And it will be the thing that actually does cause kids to disconnect and disengage from learning in the long run.

**Berkshire** The middle schoolers we've been hearing from are headed back into school just in time for spring testing season. Neema - you've been very critical of the state's priorities here. Break it down for us.

**Neema** I read a really great quote by Jesse Hagopian who writes for Rethinking Schools. And he said, you know, if someone fell into the ocean in the Arctic, it would be like, testing in this moment is like someone falls into the ocean and then you take them out and you put a thermometer in their mouth to check their temperature. When really what you need to do in that moment is like wrap them in blankets and give them something warm to drink and put them beside like a fire and try to warm them up. I think it's a great metaphor for what we're trying to do right now, which is we want to measure how much you've lost, but we're not thinking about, well, if we don't actually help you heal, can you come back from what you've lost

**Berkshire** By now you've gotten to hear from students from all over Boston about what the last year has been like. Well, Neema had another question for them.

**Neema** This is your chance to say what you actually think should happen and what you think the right things would be to do. When we go back to school, we want to know from you, like what is going to make you feel like reconnected to your friends? What is going to make you feel excited about being in school? What do you think are the things you need when you come back to school? Because adults are saying, what you need is more academics. That's basically all they think you need is more academics. And so I guess the question is like, what would you want to see school doing when you come back in person?

[Students]

**Berkshire** People just need a break. Neema - we know what these students are not enthusiastic about. That would be mandatory summer school focused on closing their academic gaps. I'm giving you dictatorial powers - not unlike those exercised by our state Commissioner of Education. We heard multiple students tell us that they need us to help them heal. How do you make that happen?

**Neema** If I ruled the world, every kid this summer would have money to go to whatever camp they wanted to go to. Or if you wanted to go see your family and it was safe to do so. And what you wanted to do this summer was traveled to see your family. I would pay for that. Or if you

really wanted to like vend your summer, like traveling to explore something like I would pay for that. I actually think with all the garbage money that we're going to spend on like horrible acceleration academies, which make me want to poke my eyes out, we could actually create really enriching and healing and connecting opportunities for young people that positioned them to come back to school in September, more ready to learn. What would it mean to like this summer after a year and four or five months of restriction to just say, like, go do the things that are going to make you feel whole, and we're going to support you in doing them. We're going to buy that plane ticket. We're going to send you to that camp. We're going to pay for that thing. Because the most important thing to us right now is that you feel whole, because if you feel whole, you'll be able to learn

**Berkshire** A huge thank you to Neema Avashia and to Laura Cennamo, who teaches at Boston's Tobin school for making this happen. And most of all, thanks to the students who allowed me to join their listening circle for this episode. And FYI: if you think that students deserve more of a say in the future of post-pandemic learning, good news. We've got another episode in the works featuring students from Lawrence, Massachusetts. And Jack and I will be right back to talk about what the push to reopen schools has to do with the push to test every kid. You don't want to miss it.

[music]

**Berkshire**

So, Jack, since we talked to Neema and got to hear all of those students in Boston, a couple of things have happened. One is that we got an indication from our new secretary of education Cardona that there will be no waivers this year, right? Standardized testing is going ahead. And the other thing is that here in Massachusetts the big news is that schools are reopening. Schools are reopening within the next couple of weeks and, you know conspiratorial young ladies, such as myself, can't help but think that this real, like all hands on deck push to get kids physically back into their schools has a lot to do with the desire of our sort of education policy infrastructure to get them get students testing. So I'm curious to get your take on that. But the other thing I'm really curious about is whether this is kind of a risky move for the testing establishment, because we're looking at something that's going to be, you know, the, maybe the correct expression would be clown car or charade. you know, do they risk kind of, you know, do they risk the whole thing? Do they risk their whole theory of change about why it is that we subject kids to these tests in the first place?

**Schneider** Well, this is the danger of us having done the show together for so long. Jennifer is that you have absorbed any of the commentary that I would offer and have embedded it in your question there, right? It's like, you just, you did it all. So is it a coincidence that leaders at the state level and the federal level are pushing so hard to get schools open before the end of the year in order to coincide with the mandatory tests that are going to be given this spring? I don't think so. You know, the entire policy apparatus that state and federal leaders have been relying on for the past two decades depends on those standardized test scores. And if you don't have

those suddenly the kind of centralized control that they have been able to exert for the past two decades becomes much more difficult to imagine.

Now there are all kinds of problems associated with that, but there are also problems associated with not being able to wield that control, right. With saying, yes, we are going to continue to direct major sources of revenue from the state and federal treasury to schools, but we're not really going to be able to exert the same kind of influence with regard to what's happening inside schools and classrooms. And so I think that that theory of change as you called it and has made me so happy to hear you call it is very much still in play here where the theory of change is that if you measure what students are learning, and of course, you know, the degree to which that's actually being measured, could be called into question here via standardized tests and then use various forms of you know, compulsion to get schools and teachers to do what you want them to do. Then you will empower the state and the federal government in ways that they had not been for most of their histories.

**Berkshire** Well, Jack last episode in the special area that we call in the weeds that we do for our Patreon subscribers, you gave this incredibly passionate kind of, of, of the whole push to test kids, as soon as they get back to school. And you talked about your daughter and it was amazing. I got so much feedback from people who were really moved by that. And after awhile, I was like enough already. It's Jack.

**Schneider** Yeah. Although I can see what you've done here is that you have used your, what seems like a compliment as a means of selling the Patreon to people. Well done there to.

**Berkshire** Well, actually Jack that was coming down the pike in just a few minutes, but first someone wrote in with a question and I didn't have the answer. The listener wanted to know what does Jack think of opting out? And I was curious, what, what do you think of opting out? Is that something that you think people should consider right now?

**Schneider** Yeah, I think that there are really two ways of thinking about it. One is that if a critical mass of people opt out, that it effectively invalidates the data. And that's one of the major concerns that I have about testing this spring is that we will see non-random and non-representative attrition in terms of student participation. So let me put that in English for our listeners. If you test everybody, then you know that the results represent that entire population. If you only test some students, then you want to make sure that those students represent the larger and more complete body that you are trying to assemble information about. And you can do that one of two ways. You can either assemble a representative sample, and that's what we do with the NAEP, the National Assessment of Educational Progress or you can assemble a random sample.

And if it's large enough, it will be representative. But if, for instance, you see parents of color not sending their kids to school for testing more often than white parents not doing that. If you see lower-income parents doing that, if you see higher income parents doing that, you know, whatever it is if people are not sending their kids in to be tested on a non-random or

non-representative basis, then the data don't reflect the larger population you've effectively ruined the dataset. And I think as a means of protest, that that's actually pretty effective. A second way of looking at it is to take our race conscious and class conscious lens to it, and to ask, you know, to what degree is the opt-out movement going to be a truly inclusive protest movement? I think it varies from place to place, but there is definitely evidence that the opt-out efforts in some states or, you know, some regions or some has been largely white and middle-class, and that as a result you know, not only is it not necessarily representative in terms of the aims of the movement, but you know, the benefit of not having your kids sit for standardized tests would not accrue to everybody equally.

And so I would say that, you know, those who are considering opting out as a kind of social protest should be doing whatever you know, good activists do when they are engaging in protest. And that is trying to be as inclusive as possible, particularly with regard to people who are often marginalized.

**Berkshire** Well, Jack, I can imagine that after hearing you, people are probably really intrigued. They want to go back and they want to listen to that In the Weeds to hear your impassioned crusade.

**Schneider** I know what you're doing, Jennifer. I'm not going to be a part of it. I'm muting myself while you do this.

**Berkshire** Well, as our regular listeners know, we support the podcast and pay our excellent producer through Patreon.com. If this interests you, all you have to do is go to [patreon.com/haveyouheardpodcast](https://patreon.com/haveyouheardpodcast), and you'll see a list of all the cool extras you can get. We do a reading list that goes with every episode and you get to come to an exclusive area that we call In the Weeds. And today we are going to talk about the return of integration, which is suddenly back on the policy table, after a very lengthy absence. And Jack, I understand that you have some new research out,

**Schneider** You know, you're trying to get me to just start talking about that. And then you're going to say like, well, if you want to hear more, come into the Weeds, but I'm not going to take the bait there. I'm going to remind people that if they don't want to be in the exclusive space that is created by the erection of a paywall, that they can remain in the public and a cost free space. That is the bulk of our show, and that they can actually help support this democratic community by sharing the show with their friends, by offering us their feedback via the Twitter handle at, have you heard pod by sending us an email that Have You Heard mailbag. It's always fun to go through. We've gotten lots of good ideas for shows from some of our listeners.

And of course there is a certain seamy underside to this enterprise, which is that, you know, star ratings do apply. So please go on and give us a rating wherever you download the podcast from make sure that you are subscribing so that you get the latest episodes. And if then after all of that, you are still thirsty for more than I suppose you can follow us into the Weeds today. We'll talk a little bit about some research that my group just completed, where we found that the

benefits of integrated schools often accrue most consistently to white students, which is not a part of the traditional narrative.

**Berkshire** I knew it. I knew I could get you to flog for our for-profit venture. If I just used your own research as a lure proving once again, dear listeners that I know Jack Schneider. Well, on that note, I'm Jennifer Berkshire.

**Schneider** And I'm a sucker.

**Berkshire** This is Have You Heard.