

#94 Contract Talk: New Research on the Future of Unions

Jennifer Berkshire Welcome to Have You Heard, I'm Jennifer Berkshire. And Jack many, many, many months ago before we were entered into a permanent quarantine and separated from one another, we launched a graduate student research contest.

Jack Schneider Talking about it makes me feel like I have entered into a time capsule and have traveled back to a kinder world, Jennifer. I'm really excited.

Berkshire I'll confess Jack that I was the one who did get a little sidetracked. And so I take full responsibility for the delay in getting this episode out. But as is so often the case, I feel like the times we're living through make the research of our runners up who we are going to be featuring in this episode even more timely and relevant.

Schneider We first received their submissions last fall when we solicited entries to our Graduate Student Research Contest, which is now an annual affair. This was the second time that we did it. And the motivator behind the contest for those who didn't pay attention last year and shame on you for that is that we think that the work of communicating educational research to the public is extremely important. And we have had countless guests on this show who have proven themselves to be really expert at that. And you know, one of our aims on this show is to give them a platform, but we also wanted to begin to open up that platform for younger researchers who are at the very beginning of their careers, not only to give them the opportunity, but also to maybe inspire other people to begin thinking not just about publishing their work in pay walled peer reviewed journals but also for the broader public.

Berkshire So our original idea when we did the first graduate student research contest was that we would pick a winner, but we were sort of immediately flummoxed by how many great entries we got. Last year we ended up picking a winner and a runner up.

Schneider And for those people who didn't listen to the episodes or who would like to revisit those episodes, number 69 Progressive Charter Schools vs the Education Marketplace features our winner from last year's contest. That was Elise Castillo. And episode number 75 Storefront School: Excavating a Radical Education Experiment in Harlem features Barry Goldenberg, who was our runner up.

Berkshire This year not only did we pick a winner who you'll meet this fall, but we actually found two runners up. That's how great they were. And Jack, I just have to say that working on this episode made me so happy. I feel like I got to meet two really amazing people and just hearing about how their research took shape gave me, I think, a better sense than I've ever had about how education research is actually done. I know that sounds kind of weird considering that I hear you talk about it day after day.

Schneider I feel bad, Jennifer. I'm glad somebody finally said something that was illuminating for you.

[Music]

Berkshire Well I am thrilled to get to introduce you to the runners up in our graduate student research contest. Mimi Lyon received her PhD from Teachers College at Columbia University in the Department of Education Policy and Social Analysis. She's currently doing a post-doc at Annenberg Institute for School Reform at Brown University. Adam Kirk Edgerton received his PhD in education policy from the University of Pennsylvania. He is now a senior researcher at the Learning Policy Institute.

OK - Now that you know who they are let's talk about how Mimi and Adam ended up together on this podcast. Well, as you're going to hear, they share a common research interest - that would be teachers unions. And that's not all. As we learned more about their work and listened to the audio samples they submitted, something leaped out at us. Their respective journeys had a lot in common. For Mimi Lyon, it started in Houston, Texas in 2010 where she was a new teacher at a charter school.

Mimi Lyon My coworkers and I, we were often talking amongst each other about how we didn't feel like we were treated very well. How we were working really hard. We often were working 80 hours a week in school and then doing additional grading on the weekends. We were often feeling really close to burning out. And then also seeing other teachers in our school having experienced the same feelings for a couple of years and then becoming burnt out and then leaving so that we were also sort of suffering from this constant churn of new teachers at my school, the concept of banning together to share some of this information with the administration didn't really even come up. It didn't even come up as a thought in our heads.

Berkshire Now I know that ten years ago feels like 100 years ago given all that's happening around us right now but 2010 was a very particular cultural moment in American education and I'm betting that a lot of listeners remember it.

Lyon "Waiting for Superman" had just come out. And my school actually organized a whole field trip so we would all go to the movie theater and watch Waiting for Superman together. And there was just a lot of negativity around the idea of teacher unionization. But I felt like teachers were being treated really poorly in my school and in other schools around the city and around the state. And so when I came to graduate school, I was really keen to learn more about teacher unionization.

Berkshire Adam started teaching around the same time. It was during the recession, and he ended up in Lawrence, Massachusetts, which was on the cusp of a state takeover. Unlike Mimi, Adam was in a union, something he had, well, mixed feelings about. But as the state began rolling out an ambitious reform agenda, a lot of those union protections disappeared.

Adam Kirk Edgerton I was struggling financially. I had gone to Harvard and taken out student loans. I was a North Carolina Teaching Fellow and I didn't teach in North Carolina. So I had to pay back those loans and I was working multiple jobs and trying to stay afloat. And so I wasn't really like super involved in the local union politics. But when the turnaround was announced, I saw the restructuring and the reforms start to happen. And they all just kind of happened without me knowing. It kind of caught people by surprise. We knew that the state was going to do something, but it was even to the point where, you know, people were finding out their positions were open because they were posted online. My assistant principal, who I loved, found out that way, that she was not going to be renewed. So there was a lot, a lot happening. And it was hard for me to identify like what is from the state, what's from the district, what's from the union, what does the local community want, who I'm not really a part of? It was very difficult to wrap my head around all of these different issues.

Berkshire So there's one more bit of context you need to know here. While both Adam and Mimi began their teaching careers at a time when unions and union contracts were held up as THE reason for struggling schools, they both came from states where unions barely existed. Adam grew up in North Carolina where teachers and other public employees are banned from collective bargaining.

Edgerton In North Carolina, we were actually at the forefront of a lot of the accountability movement that started federally with No Child Left Behind. But North Carolina was already doing a lot of that in the nineties when I was growing up, right? So I was taking those...I was often like in the first class taking those tests. So having seen those reforms kind of be rolled out in a non-unionized environment with less political resistance, I was interested in knowing whether the union was really the impediment to enacting these reforms, or was it more about people's perceptions of how public money is spent? Like is there a partisan connection between how Republicans and Democrats approach the public sector that isn't necessarily connected to what the local union is actually doing?

Berkshire And where Mimi grew up, unions were just never mentioned.

Lyon Having grown up in states where unionization was not a concept that people thought of and where it didn't seem like education was going that great. Tennessee was doing a lot of stuff. Tennessee is still doing a lot of stuff. And I don't mean to bash Tennessee, but I felt like there was a huge opportunity for teachers to be able to improve education that wasn't happening and that maybe teachers and their unions were a way to do that.

Berkshire So Jack we've talked about sort of teacher bashing through the ages on this show before but there was a dramatic rhetorical shift that took place at this point and I think we need your help to unpack it. Adam told me something that I'm still thinking about how when he was going into teaching it was presented as a calling, and within a few years it had been rebranded as an emergency intervention to solve major social problems. So I guess what I want to know is

whether these sorts of rhetorical shifts have happened a lot in the history of public education in this country.

Schneider I don't think they happen that frequently. I think that what we saw in the early two thousands was the peak of a movement that had been developing for a few decades since the 1980s, probably, that was all about backlash to the rise of a bureaucratic system of teacher professionalism. And what I mean by that is that for decades, beginning in the late 19th century, so in about the 1880s and 1890s school reformers, teacher-leaders, members of the lay public had all been in favor of teachers gaining college and university based training that would lead to state certification and placement in a classroom. That standardization was an aim because prior to that teacher education didn't exist and teacher qualifications were all over the map and often nonexistent. That standardization and kind of universal quality control, these were major aims across the early 20th century.

And through about the 1950s, when actually there is a realization of that aim, by the 1950s, all teachers are college educated, state certified professionals who are making more money than teachers had ever made, who are better educated than teachers had ever been. And who remained more educated than most of the communities in which they were teaching this begins to change. However, because of course it all came at the expense of the kind of flexibility and, you know, fly by night policymaking that had characterized the mid 19th century. And suddenly you began to see all of these criticisms of the teacher preparation industry of, you know, teachers who had gone through a certified program, but were not content area experts. This kind of criticism builds steam into the 1990s where really we see the triumph of a policy paradigm that posits that really policy should be made based on common sense.

And what, what is common sense? Well that you don't need teacher preparation, that all you need to be as smart and hardworking and willing to go in and work where you are needed. And that really was the driver of so many education reforms in the nineties and early aughts, and is often best characterized by the media attention that Teach for America got, right? Teach for America is kind of the apotheosis of this idea. And so it's so interesting that Adam and Mimi were trained during this period, right?, that they entered classrooms during this period. And that it was only as they began to experience reality on the ground that they began to ask the questions about these kinds of policies that actually brought them into the classroom that led to the research that they're doing today.

Berkshire Thank you Jack for that very thorough explanation. Now about that research. For Adam here was an opportunity to test a central claim in the education reform theory of change.

Edgerton I really wanted to quantify what was in collective bargaining agreements. Because the rhetoric at the time, and perhaps even still, was that the agreement was the impediment to reform. And I wasn't sure if that was necessarily true. I mean, if you could get political support for somethings as there were for some things in Lawrence, then, you know, was it really the

agreement that was the issue or is it more out kind of building support in the community and not being an outsider and having kind of a slow gradual agenda with lots of stakeholder feedback?

Berkshire To answer the question of whether union contracts relate to student achievement, Adam did the obvious - he built an original database of all 499 union contracts in the state of Pennsylvania.

Edgerton Well, I was lucky that Pennsylvania is a right to know state. And so people have to respond to your request in five business days. So if you asked for a contract, the district has to respond. So I was able to get all the contracts, which isn't always the case in other states, but then I had to go through with a checklist for 499 contracts, which is about 30,000 pages and build out a database. And that's only for one year. So there are technologies that are just kind of coming out like natural language processing that some other people are really proficient with, but I really did it the old fashioned way and just spent months every day going through the contracts and populating the database so that I could run some analysis.

Berkshire Mimi, meanwhile, had started out with an interest in studying unionization and charter schools but the more she learned about the history of teacher unions the more she wanted to know. Her research kept expanding to include the political alliances that teachers unions have been part of.

Lyon Where I landed was something that sort of intersected this belief that teachers unions were not just advocates for teachers, but were also acting as political actors in this broader political arena, and for better or for worse had to navigate some of those tensions between building alliances with other groups that some of their members might not feel connected to. And then also strengthening their own membership base and building up their own membership base.

Berkshire She ended up with a project that is both historical AND empirical. She built an historical database that tracked the rise of teacher unions and the effects of laws prohibiting strikes, agency fees and collective bargaining from 1942 to the present. Her goal: to identify how these restrictive labor policies affect not just education outcomes but other policies that progressive coalitions have historically pushed for.

Lyon And so I looked at the effects of these laws hindering teacher unionization on other policies having to do with the social safety net, like AFDC benefits. I also looked at gun policies and tax policies and other policies that progressive groups have been pushing for to see whether or not these restrictive labor policies for teachers unions affected the overall sort of progressive policy landscape within the state. And I found that it did.

Berkshire As for the results of their research well we're getting to that. Adam's research question is posed right in the title of his dissertation: worth the fight?

Edgerton I asked the question, is it worth the fight? Meaning is it worth the Race at the Top money? The political fights that were fought to implement a host of reforms on teacher accountability, seniority rules. And we can look back now, right? We have like 10 years of data. My project only looks at one year of data and only looks at Pennsylvania. But if we look at the whole scope of the literature, we see that the attention now is turning to the material needs of schools, especially in the pandemic. We know that the more important things are like school finance, equalizing spending between the highest and the lowest districts in terms of wealth and property tax. These are the things that make big differences in education, not these kinds of small scale reforms.

And so the question... let's say the best case scenario was the fullest fidelity, we can achieve some gains. In terms of the cost of that, not just the financial cost, but the political costs or the cost to the teaching workforce, is it worth it to kind of achieve these short term gains to make all of these contractual changes? And I think we're seeing now that the people are focused on bigger issues.

Berkshire As for Mimi, her comprehensive look at the effects of policies hindering teacher unionization also produced a clear answer. These sorts of laws have hindered progressive tax and safety net policies in the states that have them on the books

Lyon In terms of tax policies, thinking about progressive tax policies, like having higher corporate tax rates, having income taxes, state income taxes ,I found that there were lower instances of these kinds of policies in places that had restricted teachers unions, specifically with prohibiting collective bargaining and prohibiting agency fees, not as much Strikes. And then even more so for the social safety net, I found that policies restricting agency fees really reduced the size of the social safety net within the states.

Berkshire One of the things that I think is so cool about this is that even though Mimi and Adam come out of these sort of similar moments, their research ends up taking such different shapes, right? That you have Adam really sort of drilling down, right? Like you can, you can picture him scanning 30,000 pages in order to compile all of these contracts into a database. And Mimi's in many ways going the opposite direction. She's thinking in these sort of vast historical terms, but both of them really do end up answering the questions that those early experiences raised for them.

Schneider I think it speaks to the importance of having a good research question, driving you from the beginning of your efforts, because I think so often we resort to talking first about methods. You know, how are you going to look at whatever data you get your hands on? And I find so often I'm uninspired by the questions that people are asking. And oftentimes it seems like they're uninspired by the questions they're asking. They're asking the questions either because nobody has before or because it's an easy question to answer. They just happen to have access to the information that will enable them to answer it. But here's a case where people were really deeply motivated by a kind of inherently compelling question to an educator.

And not surprisingly, even though they approach it in different ways, both of them come up with pretty compelling responses that actually fit pretty nicely together.

Berkshire We started out this episode by highlighting the cultural moment when Adam and Mimi began their teaching careers - one where teachers and students are viewed as having opposing interests. Well both of them have tried to use their own research to push past that story.

Lyon I kept finding this story and feeling like we needed an update to this story and trying to figure out a way that I could sort of encourage the literature to move past this view of teachers versus students, or that had to be one or the other teachers versus students or teachers as you know, the heroes of the story of education. And to try to build some, some more nuance into our discussion of teacher unionization.

Edgerton You know, I think people like me born in the eighties that grew up in the nineties that were kind of part of this third way, middle ground way of thinking was that the parameters were not going to change. We weren't gonna really be able to get money for schools. We weren't going to really be able to raise teacher salaries significantly. So let's try all of these different, smaller things. And I think what we're seeing now is that, you know, not that they were a waste of time or not that they don't work, but that let's think bigger.

Berkshire The time period in which Mimi and Adam moved from teaching to research has been an eventful one for teachers and their unions. We've gone from Waiting for Superman to Red for Ed to the Supreme Court's Janus decision and of course a pandemic. I wanted to know, based on what they've come to understand about the recent and not so recent past, what do they think the future holds for teachers unions. Mimi's take is pretty optimistic.

Lyon They have this opportunity to sort of band together and once and for all kind of reframe the conversation around teachers versus students and other workers and say, no, we are workers and that we are fighting for protections for middle and working class people, and that is what we are doing. That we are part of labor unions, the teacher unions, in particular, we are labor unions and we are going to protect our workers and other workers in the United States. I think we're at this key moment in time where the unions, the teachers unions could be leading a broader labor movement of other workers. And I think that changes now have the potential to reshape the institutional landscape for labor unions in the United States in the long term.

Berkshire As for Adam, well he's not quite as hopeful, in part because he's seen popular opinion turn against teachers so quickly in the past.

Edgerton I mean, what worries me is that the kind of heroism that was applied to teachers and doctors and nurses and grocery store...people that work at the grocery store, is used now that there's pushback from teachers unions to kind of scapegoat teachers as responsible for not

rising to the occasion. And, and many people have noted that teachers are able to push back because they are organized in a way that, you know, lower income, essential workers are not. It's going to be interesting to see how the media landscape unfolds around that.

Berkshire I had one more question that I wanted to put to Adam and Mimi. A decade has now passed since those pivotal teaching experiences that sparked their research questions, culminating, of course, in this podcast episode. So I wanted to know: ten years later, what kind of advice might they give to their younger selves.

I was so eager to do a good job and to impress my supervisors and to do everything I possibly could, that I just worked myself to the bone. I think the first thing I needed to do was get some more sleep. And then the second thing would be to organize for that, to really talk about systematically what needed to happen to better represent our voices and to have some protected way of expressing the concerns that we were all feeling.

Edgerton It is just to kind of think about what is the long-term strategy. Like, you know, there are a lot of things that we can deal with, like now in the pandemic, right? We can focus on the very, very short term. We can focus on is it in person? Is it virtual? Do we have a digital curriculum? Or we can really think about like long-term strategic planning.

I think that's a lot of what wasn't done in the, in the early days and what I didn't do on an individual level, right? I didn't think about am I going to be in Lawrence for 10 or 20 years, or is this part of me just figuring it out? And if I'm just figuring it out, then what are the negative impacts on the people that I'm trying to serve?

And I think people ask this questions upfront in a way that we didn't 10 years ago. And I mean, I think that's a good thing. I think that these are positives. I wish that we had listened more to voices of color, to scholars of color and listened less to what do we need to do to improve student achievement, right? That it's a very narrow question. And it creates a very narrow set of responses.

Berkshire A big congratulations to our graduate student research contest runners up, Mimi Lyon and Adam Kirk Edgerton. And Jack and I will be right back to talk about what we've learned from these outstanding scholars and to reveal the subject of this episode in the weeds feature for our Patreon subscribers. A little hint - it starts with the letter Q. I feel like I've been hearing that letter a lot lately.

[Music]

Berkshire So Jack often when we interview researchers, we ask them a little bit about like the impetus for their work, but this was an unusual and unusually rewarding experience for me, to get to hear about how the experiences that Mimi and Adam had that proved to be so formative and then to, you know, really get to hear about how their research took shape in response to

that. But as I listened to them, I couldn't help but think that you and I are in a weird way kind of part of that story too. So, you know, we heard Adam talking about the Lawrence schools. Well, that was actually what got me started, right? That I started going to Lawrence to observe the state takeover. And instead of then, you know, going on and getting a PhD in education policy, I decided to start a snarky blog. But that really was, like that was my concern that what the state was offering was too small for what the community foresaw, understood the problem to be, that that set me on my path. And I wondered as I was listening to them talk whether in some ways your work has also been shaped by the kind of rhetorical excesses of that moment

Schneider For me, you know, it was a moment of just complete and utter outrage with the way that schools were being talked about in the *Boston Globe*, which is, you know, pretty typical. It's not like they were engaging in a kind of discussion about school quality that is that outside the norm. They were talking about schools with low standardized test scores as being bad schools. And that's, that's pretty standard these days, but it's racist and it's classist. And my daughter attends an urban school that does not have exemplary scores, and I'm perfectly happy with her school. And I found that as I looked around, I was increasingly concerned about school segregation being exacerbated by this. And I just did what so many people do these days. I took to Twitter. And pretty soon my research agenda began shifting from focusing exclusively on the history of education to looking at how school quality is measured, looking at how we talk about school quality and use data to support our often unfounded positions.

Berkshire Well, Jack speaking of research, our, the topic that I've selected for our Patreon subscribers for our special In the Weeds segment is also research related. Do you have any idea what it is?

Schneider I am honestly guessing that it's not research related knowing you and based on this setup. So that's, that's as warm as I can get. Go on.

Berkshire Good Jack. The answer is QAnon So I am a little bit obsessed with this story, which is now kind of bursting into the mainstream now that you know, people are starting to elect candidates and it turns out that QAnon related groups have millions and millions of followers on Facebook, but Jack, in our, in weed segment, I'm going to make the argument to you that this is - wait for it - an education story,

Schneider Jennifer, I look forward to that, but before you lure people to the paywall and find a way to extract \$2 a month from their wallets and purses, let me just remind our listeners that there are lots of ways to support the show. The one that I always encourage people to do is to share it, email, a link to somebody you like, send them a note that says, you know, I thought you'd be interested in this episode. You also can go on and give us a rating wherever you get your podcasts. And it's always fun when you engage with the show's Twitter handle, @haveyouheardpod. We've gotten some great ideas for shows there, and it's also just fun to see how people are responding to episodes we've done.

Berkshire And if you are interested in QAnon dot dot the new education story, all you have to do is go to [Patreon.com/haveyouheardpodcast](https://patreon.com/haveyouheardpodcast), and you'll find the list of all the cool extras you can get just by throwing a few dollars, our way each month, like custom reading lists that we do for each episode and entry into an exclusive area we call In the Weeds. And our eternal gratitude. And Jack, just one other note. We actually got an email from a listener a couple of weeks ago wanting to know, are you guys going to do the research contest again?

Schneider It is called the *annual* graduate student research contest. And in as much as the calendars have turned over a new leaf, we will be opening the gates once more, just in a couple of months. So look for that on Twitter or on the podcast webpage.

Berkshire So many things to look forward to. On that happy note, I'm Jennifer Berkshire.

Schneider And I'm Jack Schneider.

Berkshire This is Have You Heard.