Transcript

Welcome to the Oxford Education Deanery podcast.

In this series,

we explore the latest research from the Department of Education at the University of Oxford and discuss the real world implications for teachers,

parents and policymakers.

Each podcast is accompanied by a Deanery Digest, a short, plain language summary of the research, which can be downloaded from our website.

Welcome to the Oxford Education Deanery podcast.

My name is Hamish Chalmers and I'm here with two guests today, Doctor Julia Badger, departmental lecturer of child development and education,

and Simon Fox, who's an assistant principal in an English specialist setting supporting learners with ADHD and neurodivergent diagnoses.

Welcome to the podcast. Okay. Today we're going to be talking about bullying.

Julia has been involved in a research project trying to redefine bullying in

inclusive ways for children with special educational needs and disabilities.

So I'd like to start by asking you what is bullying? Um, it's a really good question.

And considering it's such a public health concern, you'd think we'd have a good definition for it.

Unfortunately, we don't. Um, there's no unified or standardised definition, uh, across the world.

Um, even actually across our country, there are, though, three elements that tend to be picked up, um, when people are talking about bullying.

Those tend to be a repeated negative behaviour, an imbalance of power, uh,

which also means that the person who is being bullied or struggles to defend themselves.

And then there's the intent. So the intent to cause harm.

So although there are other elements often found in bullying definitions, those tend to be the same three that were pulled up.

And how did these manifest themselves? Can you give us some examples of what sort of behaviours would be, um, would fit those kinds of definitions?

So types of bullying, um, you get different types. So you can have um, the traditional which would be physical bullying, um, and verbal bullying.

Um, relational bullying uh, which is could be seen as sort of exclusion or talking behind someone's back.

Um, and then you have cyber bullying. So online. So those are the four types of, of bullying.

And some probably are more familiar to others. And Simon here talking in particular about children with special educational needs and disabilities.

Is there a particular way that bullying manifests itself in those settings,

which differs from what you might describe as a mainstream setting, or is it rather similar?

I don't think so.

I think there are lots of similarities it which are largely linked to struggles with social communication, not being able to be understood.

Often we'll see that those behaviours, uh,

just a normal part of engagement and that the difficulties come when we identify a disparity between learners trying to communicate with each other.

So your project, Julia looked at that in particular, and you've said that it's a public health issue,

and we don't have an agreed definition of what bullying is, although in the various ways that we see it, um, defined, there are commonalities there.

So how did you approach this specifically with a C and D mindset?

So in working, I've worked in mainstream schools for 20 years.

The researcher and the last five or so years very much working um, with specialist education schools and settings.

Um, and it became very apparent that although, as Simon says, there are a lot of overlaps and similarities, the definitions are often used.

Aren't that inclusive. Um, so the experiences can be different.

So for example, um, is it bullying? If the person who's being bullied actually doesn't realise they're being bullied?

Yes it is. You don't see that as much in mainstream school where, you know, in the specialist setting as you do.

So I wanted to see, you know, the power imbalance. You know,

traditionally we would say that bullying would be between someone who's older against someone younger or someone bigger against someone smaller.

That's the inability to defend oneself. Again, in a specialist setting, it can look very different.

So it could be on, um, their social communication ability or emotional stability or intellectual capacity.

You know, there can be different reasons why people would be would be bullying someone else.

So from my point of view, I was sort of thinking, you know, it's all very well as having these three elements of bullying.

But ultimately, unless we we can see the wide range of situations and, um,

and conditions that people can be put into, we can't ever fully define it properly.

If we can't define it properly, we can't monitor and manage it.

And if we don't know that, we don't ever really know the true statistics in the Deanery Digest that you've published on the website.

And we'll leave a link to that. At the bottom of the show notes, you coin and define a new term, counter connecting.

Can you explain that? Yeah. And this is really funny, actually. So, um, this is how Simon and I first, um, connected, uh, because of this forum,

we saw the paper on bullying accounts connecting the project that I was running

was very much focussed on finding a an inclusive definition of bullying.

But actually what kept coming out is the type of behaviour that was often seen as bullying or maybe bullying, but wasn't really bullying.

And Simon and I were talking about this earlier.

I was saying actually, this was probably one of the the most interesting things that came out of the research, the need for the new term.

So counter connecting is, is something is often been seen as bullying but isn't.

It has a victim, but there's no bully. So you have someone who is being, um, targeted or, as we say, maybe focussed upon,

uh, there isn't someone who's intentionally trying to cause that home.

How do you deal with that situation? And actually, the more I spoke to um teachers, school staff, educators and parents,

the more this kept coming out that there's this type of behaviour which is often either defined as bullying and shouldn't be because there

is no bully or is kind of being swept to one side as I was just someone trying to connect with you in a particular way and getting it,

getting it wrong. Can you give us an example about what counter connecting might look like then?

There are two strands of connecting. One is trying to connect with someone else and getting it wrong, hence the counter.

And the other is trying to connect with yourself and getting it wrong.

Uh, and in both situations someone else is harmed.

So thinking about the first one, which is probably the most common that people would say, say, for example,

if I struggle with social situations, um, but I see you, I think, oh, I want to be your friend.

I don't know you that well, but I want to be your friend. Something about you, you know.

I want to want to be there with you, playing with you at Breaktime or something.

I just don't know how to initiate that. So my. What you for a little while?

Um. And then when I feel confident, I'm going to try and connect with you.

I'm going to try and show you that I want to be your friend. I don't know how to do that.

So I'm going to go up to you, and I'm going to punch you on the arm. You probably don't like that very much.

Um, and you might run away or shout at me or something.

I'm not entirely sure if that's a good connection or not, but we have connected in some way because you've responded to my my action.

So I'm going to do it again. So I might run after you and I might punch you again.

And that might be on one day across two days, multiple days, weeks and so on.

And this might go on. I just want to be your friend. But the way it's coming across to you is that you are being targeted.

That's really interesting. And it sounds to me someone who doesn't know an awful lot about special needs, um,

and disabilities kind of field that that might be more prevalent with children who are less sort of cut into social cues and so on.

As somebody who works in a specialist setting, Simon, what were your initial thoughts when you read Julia's paper?

The interesting thing was that we have been working with these connections for as long as I've been in.

I've been a teacher, and you do see the same things in mainstream settings,

because the number of children with Pacific differences smaller than even more likely to be misrepresented, misunderstood.

But actually it was it was interesting because we've been working through some things with a couple

of our families,

and we'd been trying to figure out how we explained to them what we were observing.

And it was it was serendipitous. It just kind of popped up. I read the paper and got in touch straightaway,

because this is exactly what we've been trying to explain to, to be able to say, no, this is what this is.

This has a name, this this is a thing.

This phenomenon that we're observing is a really useful way for us to be able to show you as a family why it's so important to make that distinction.

Because as soon as we go down the the path of talking about bullying, it has a big impact for schools and for families as well.

And of course, it's not bullying. And that's really damaging potentially for the child if they are called a bully.

Yeah. And potentially they might not try and socially connect again because they don't understand what they've done wrong.

That can be really detrimental to the child as well,

particularly when you think that they might be doing they might have one close friendship where the rules around engagement are really clear.

They try to replicate that. Well, this works with my friend here.

I'm going to do the same with this person, and then we can connect in the same way.

But they don't they don't recognise the the the method for connecting needs to be personalised.

It needs to be relevant to the people that are involved in it. Sometimes we'll see folks who watch others.

I've seen this person behave in a particular way with somebody that I'd like to be my friend.

That's how they connect. So I'm going to copy that because I've seen that that's what works, but that's what works for those two people.

The lack of social experience that would allow them to recognise the connections that they're

looking to make will be individualised and personalised to them in that relationship.

And so, from a practical point of view, as a teacher,

how have you interpreted this research and what is it doing in terms of any modifications to your practice?

Ah, you've touched on the importance of how you can explain different behaviours to parents of children,

but in terms of the children themselves, are you using this terminology or is it just informing the way that you interact with your children?

We're using the term counts connection. A lot of these children work in absolutes.

We need to be clear, and we've had to be vague trying to explain what we're observing.

But by giving it a name, it makes it much easier to be able to say, hey, look, we've seen you do this.

Do you do this with this person? You can't do that with this person because you can't connect in the same way.

So we know that you're just you just want to be their friend.

We know that you're trying to build a relationship, but we have to help you to understand that actually, that's not what's happening here.

And, you know, the idea of everybody being validated.

We're all right. You're absolutely right. You're trying to make a friendship.

The other person's absolutely right because that's not working for them.

So by being able to be really clear that we understand both of your positions.

We need to find a way to navigate that and to support you with that. This is really important stuff.

And just the idea of being able to call it something was was really,

really it was a big shift for us in terms of a sort of a distinction between

what might be described as more sort of traditional definitions of bullying.

Is it in? Have you been thinking about how you differentiate that within the the school context and the importance of having this extra to a tool,

I suppose, in the toolkit? Yeah, this is a really interesting one.

Um, so I don't want it to be that it's bullying or counter connect because there are other things that perhaps could be that could be bullying.

One's connecting, arguing, disagreeing.

It could be just playing accidents, you know, lots of different types of behaviours that should be distinguished from each other.

I do think that this is something, as Simon says, it would perhaps was missing a label, missing a, a terminology and a terminology.

So you mentioned earlier that there were two types of counts of connecting, and we just discussed one of them.

So tell us about the other type. Yeah. So um, the first one is trying to connect with someone else.

The other type is trying to connect with yourself and getting it wrong as a consequence.

As such, someone else gets harmed. So in this situation it could be, for example, um, a child is feeling very overwhelmed, emotionally overwhelmed.

They're struggling to regulate their own emotions. Um, and it builds up and builds up and builds up.

And at some point they might lash out because it's become so overwhelming.

As a consequence, they may have hit somebody who's sitting next to them.

They're not intending to harm that person. They're actually not intending to even touch that person or hit that person, but that as a consequence,

as a response, that person again, probably doesn't like that very much and might shout or make a noise or something.

What we see, as I said, this is just one example. What we see in those situations, almost like a stimulus response.

The child who is connecting gets some sort of, um, distraction from the other child's response, and it

starts to calm them down.

It starts to sort of allow them to regulate a bit more. Nine itself is absolutely fine.

Unfortunately, sometimes sees that that child then at a later date,

if they start to feel overwhelmed or dysregulated, they might seek that same child out again.

They might hit them not actually to cause them harm.

They don't upset them, but just to get that stimulus response from them again, because they know that last time that helped them to to regulate.

And so it's another example of them trying to actually connect with their own emotions and regulate themselves.

Getting it wrong. And as a consequence, someone else's is harmed. How do you see this in your school as well, Simon?

Yeah, absolutely. And we we see it with our learners and with stuff as well.

So if we have a dysregulated learner, we know that the behaviour that we observe is telling us something.

They are looking for something from someone. And sometimes if you you misinterpret those things, if you don't recognise what's happening,

i.e. overwhelm leading to meltdown, it's massively misread.

We see it all the time,

and it's the nature of being a school with an entire population of young people who have neurodiversity as a part of their day to day lives.

The only thing that they all have in common is very HTP and and neurodivergent.

But the neurodivergent is different for each of them. So we have these really interesting dynamics where they clash.

They clash with each other not because they're looking to, but because they they need different things.

We have those children that are sensory seeking. We have those children that are sensory avoiding,

and that in itself creates a whole other layer.

And that's when these counter connections become much, much more obvious to us.

Glad you actually mentioned that. It it can be between peers, but it can also be from a a student to a staff member as well.

And that is valid counter connecting as well. So it could be communication that they know that they need something internally,

they know they need something, and they're actually trying to seek help or support from somebody else.

And so often that can be a member of staff. I'm constantly going back to the perhaps frivolous example, but, you know, the sort of thing of, you know,

a boy likes a girl, doesn't know how to speak to a girl, is like a bit pulls a hair or pinches out or something like that.

But so I've taken to, to a sort of a different area, a different place for me,

again, it puts a name on something which I hadn't really considered before,

but also I think I'm one of the things that would happen sometimes is these behaviours would be sort of pushed to one side a little bit because,

you know, staff knew that it wasn't bullying but didn't really have a name for it over time for it.

And so it would almost get pushed to one side, you know, um,

Julia's just trying to be nice to you and just forgive her doesn't mean it, but what does that tell our young people?

You know, if they're the recipient of this behaviour, unwanted behaviour, and in these sort of situations or staff members,

you know, unwanted behaviour and we're saying, you know, just accept it. Just accept it.

Yeah. What is that telling people when they go out into the real world, when they're not in that sort of safe school bubble.

And that's not really something we want to tell people either, is it just just accept it.

So now that you've come up with this new term, and I think that having the tools in terms of the vocabulary to talk about things

that we that we see in schools and we see in all sorts of different contexts,

where next it sits? We've got the digest, we've got the podcast, we've got the academic paper.

But where are you going to go now with it? Well, I'm very fortunate that, um, Simon and I connected over this.

Um, and we're working together at the moment, actually, to try and develop some resources,

resources and aides, probably we would say, um, so at the moment it's early stages,

but we are wanting to support people that would be school staff and parents and and

learners as well as students to actually understand the terminology and how to use it,

identify it, manage it. We're in the process. Um, we have of designing some aides.

Uh, I think that I think particularly with staff, they're aware of these interactions are by giving it a name,

it makes it easy for them to convey their experiences as well.

The hardest thing for me to do in my role is trying to support families who don't understand what's happening,

who would place themselves in a position where they're talking about bullying. We have to be able to demonstrate the distinctions,

and we're fortunate that because that all of the families have had their own issues with school experience,

that we're able to reframe a lot of those things with them in a way that we might not be able to or they haven't been able to previously.

But being able to use this tool to say, hey, look, this is what we're observing, this is what we can say.

This is how things look and feel different. And having having a resource that says, this is where we're at as a.

Forward as a support for them. I think it's really important. What's the response been from parents,

you know.

Well I think it's been it's been really good.

I can think of a couple of conversations that we've had that started out and were initially very difficult,

but when we're able to to just to slow things down a little bit and to say these are the things that we can say,

these are the things we've observed,

that refresher and that reminder that all of the learners that we're working with have their own differences and difficulties.

All of them struggle with social communication.

When we put two learners together that both struggle with social communication in different ways is obviously going to be difficult.

It will be hard to be able to manage into the manifest the kind of relationships that they want,

but the sense is that they're they are ready to hear those conversations.

They're so used to interactions with schools being about behaviour.

You know, they've had there's been a ten minute blip in the day. They've been at school for 5.5 hours.

They have a 40 minute conversation about ten minutes, thereby changing our relationship with the families.

It gives us the space. They're ready to listen to those kind of conversations. The great thing about the way that we're operating.

But when we're able to look back and say, this is what we can say and we find as well,

I'm it might be something you're aware of, but we get a lot of conflated stories.

We get narratives from families, and everything that they share with us is correct.

But when we look into it, what we find is that the story that we've received is built of 3 or 4 different stories.

Everything that happened is true, but they happened in 3 or 4 different places,

and the neurodivergent mind has pulled them all together and created a new story, which is that's horrific.

It's shocking. How could this ever have happened? But by taking that time to be able to reframe those things, then it changes perspective massively.

One of the things that we try to promote here that the, the, the deanery promotes the putting together researchers and practitioners.

It's really important that the research that we do at the Department of Education reflects

something meaningful for teachers and for other stakeholders in the educational sort of,

um, space, whether that's policy of practice in the classroom, at the school level or beyond.

So just a question, really, for both of you, how have you worked together and what have been the benefits of of,

of usually a working directly with somebody who's in at the chalk face, as it were.

And Simon, about connecting with somebody from the the research establishment, which may have a reputation for sort of,

you know, being in our ivory towers and being away from the reality of of what it's like to be a teacher on the ground.

Uh, well, it was a very accessible ivory tower. It's a it's one of those things, isn't it?

You know, we we connected via a social network, and it was pretty obvious that, uh, there was an opportunity for both of us to benefit from it.

I think the paper landed with me at a time when we we knew that we needed to figure out how we were going to make this work.

And I think that that was that was the big thing, you know, this suddenly we had, uh, a tool that would allow us to make our lives easier.

Um, great. And we said today where we were, we were chatting.

There's no point in doing research if it doesn't do something useful.

So it's been I it feels that it's been really beneficial for both of us to be able to for me to be

able to use the credibility of research from an institute like Oxford to support what we're doing,

you know, immediately aligns with our parents, even if they're not academic themselves, even if they haven't had their own university experience.

When we tell them that this is what we're doing and this is how we can help them to understand what's happening.

It's brilliant that that level of credibility is priceless for us. Julia.

I mean, I seek out people who, uh, you know, on the ground, um, with a real, sort of real experience, uh, to work with.

Um, I hope I'm never going to be arrogant enough to think that I actually know what it's like to be a teacher.

I'm not a teacher. I'm not a student. I'm not a support staff.

But if I'm designing and developing research that is tapping into those demographics

and potentially creating resources that are going to impact those demographics.

And the first thing I need to do is speak to the people who is going to be directly impacting.

There's nothing different in this situation. So I was, you know, very pleased when Summer reached out and I thought, absolutely,

you know, he's actually trialling this, he's proactively trialling this in his schools.

Well that's that's priceless for me. That's something that I'm unable to do as a researcher.

So to to have his insight both positive and negative, you know, are there things that we need to think about other things that aren't working?

Uh, again, I hope that we are always open to the idea that what we do in terms of research and what we publish may not be the final word.

There may be other things that that come from it, or there may be things that we need to go back and reflect on.

So it's been absolutely priceless to and always is priceless to work with, with educators.

That's when we really get to see why that the research has worked. And there's always that worries in there about bias in research that, you know,

if the research becomes self-serving and it it does what it's supposed to do because

of the way it's been constructed and because of the way it's been implemented.

The best thing for, for me with this was that it was there, it was there, and it worked and it worked straight away.

And it was it was something that we didn't have to do anything with other than absorb the paper and start applying the this new phenomenon,

this observed phenomenon, to make things better for us. So why wouldn't we?

Why wouldn't we take the time if this is the if if this is the starting point for us,

why wouldn't we look at what we can do to make this even better again?

I think this is useful to say that this research stemmed from me working with all staff and parents.

The whole paper, the whole project was me working with with school staff, parents and saying, you tell me what is the experience as you say it?

And so that's that informed the definition of redefining bullying, but also the new term council connecting.

So in that respect, the research had kind of already been done with with practitioners and parents and so on,

to the point that I could then publish something that I was pretty confident someone like Simon could pick up in and use.

And it's it speaks directly to our mission to help researchers and practitioners get together in every stage of the research process,

from conceiving of research questions to designing the research itself and then interpreting

it and feeding back on what's been going well with it and where we need to go next. It was funny, actually,

if I can just sort of jump in that we were talking earlier and I was saying counter connecting was absolutely not what I set out to coin or define or,

you know, it's been a wonderful extra, but I that was not what I had in mind at all.

As I went out to do my research. My research was on, um, bullying definitions and inclusive bullying definitions.

And this just came from it.

And I think that's one of the wonderful things about a sort of organic research process of working with people in the field to actually,

in this case, working in schools or parents of children present really demonstrates importance of us all working together.

Definitely. Great. Well, I'd like to thank you both very much for coming in.

Simon, thanks so much for your contribution. It's really nice to hear from a parent educator, just as we've been talking about.

You know, the sort of perspective from outside of our ivory tower. Uh, we let the rope down.

Uh, and welcome you in. So the Deanery digest that's associated with what we've been talking about today is called bullying or counter connecting.

And it's available on the deanery website. We'll leave a link in the show notes.

Um, that just leave it to me to say thank you very much again.

You're always welcome back for another conversation when the next stage of this research is, uh, taking shape.

So thank you both. Thank you much.

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and everything else the Deanery has to offer. Visit our website and sign up to our newsletter.

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