

Audio file

[FINAL - Education Explored - Episode 1 - Victoria Murphy.mp3](#)

Transcript

00:00:13 Speaker 1

Welcome to this brand new Department of Education podcast, Education Explored.

00:00:17 Speaker 1

My name is Heather Sherkunov and I'll be your host for this episode.

00:00:21 Speaker 1

We're launching this series to explore all things education, from teaching to research to finding out why we're one of the leading departments of education in not only the UK but the world.

00:00:31 Speaker 1

I'm thrilled to be joined today by our department director, Victoria Murphy, to launch this brand new series.

00:00:36 Speaker 1

So you've been our director now for just under four years.

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For those who don't know, the directorship is a role which is taken on a four-year tenure, and you're coming up to the end of your tenure at the end of this calendar year.

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You're also a leading academic in education with a specialist interest in the vocabulary and literacy development of children, applied linguistics and English as an additional language, and a published author.

00:01:00 Speaker 1

But I want to go all the way back to the beginning.

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What was it that sparked you on this journey to becoming a professor of applied linguistics?

00:01:08 Speaker 2

Well, first of all, thank you very much for inviting me to this podcast.

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It's very exciting to have this new series, and I'm sure it's going to be very successful in helping people understand who we are, and as you say, why we are who we are.

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So how did it all start for me?

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Well, that's an interesting question.

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I have no control group, so I'm not sure I can, you know,

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as an empiricist really answer the question without a control group.

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But I can tell you, I have thought about this before.

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And I think my interest in language started from a very early age because I was born and raised in Ottawa, Canada.

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And Ottawa is the capital city of Canada.

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Because Canada is an officially bilingual country, there's French and English all around.

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in the ambient environment, and particularly so in Ottawa because it's the seat of government in the country, but it's also geographically adjacent to Quebec, which is the French-speaking province of Canada.

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So, from the house that I grew up in at the bottom of the hill, I could actually see Quebec across the river.

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So French was always very prominent in my life, even though

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My parents were from Britain and had emigrated to Canada.

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So we didn't have any French in the home.

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And I was actually growing up in an English suburb of Ottawa.

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But nonetheless, for all the reasons I've just described, French was part of the environment.

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You couldn't avoid it.

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And when I couldn't speak French, it bugged me.

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I wanted to be able to know

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when I heard French on the radio, what they were saying.

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And when I saw French text on things, I wanted to be able to read it and understand it.

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And when I saw French on television.

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So I was always just interested in that.

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And I went to Montessori school.

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I think I started when I was three.

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And we started learning French there in the form of singing French nursery rhymes and so forth.

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And then I had an opportunity

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when I was in primary school to go to something called French Immersion, which is a bilingual education programme that was started in the late 60s.

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So I was one of the earliest cohorts of this programme.

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And basically it's a programme where a substantial portion of the instruction is through the medium of the target language, which of course in this case was French.

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So it enabled me to learn French to a higher level

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than I would have had I just been learning French as a taught subject in school, which is what happened to most English-speaking people.

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So I just was always interested in languages, really.

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And when it came to the point of making a decision about what I might study at university, the programme, the undergraduate programme in language and linguistics seemed to be the one that I would be most interested in, which it turned out to be correct, luckily for me.

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And I've just,

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I've always been interested in learning more about it.

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And when I finished my undergraduate, I did another degree in psychology and a master's degree in educational psychology.

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And because I was really interested in the how questions about how people learn languages, about how children in particular learn languages.

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and not just learning their first and native language, which I think is fascinating enough, really, but because I grew up in a sort of bilingual city, I was particularly drawn to the questions that relate to how people become multilingual and also how they do that through educational context.

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And I guess, again, that's probably originates from my own experience of having become bilingual through an educational

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programme.

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So I was always interested in that and I just went to university and basically never left.

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Still here!

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How did you make the move from being in Ottawa over to Oxford?

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Love, essentially.

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My husband and I were both doing our PhDs at the same time at McGill University in Montreal.

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And because I had our first son in the middle of doing my PhD, surprisingly, he was a bit ahead of me in terms of his progress.

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And he was coming to an end of his PhD and looking for an academic position.

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And there was an opportunity in England.

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I'm British by birth in the sense that both of my parents

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were British, so I had a British passport my whole life.

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And my husband, even though he grew up in Montreal, he was born in England.

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So we both had citizenship from our birth.

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And somehow moving to England didn't seem a foreign

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concept to us because we both independently were so familiar with the UK and England.

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We were very familiar with it, so it didn't seem so strange and foreign.

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It seemed like a kind of a fun adventure.

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So we moved to England and then I worked for several years in the Department of Psychology at the University of Hertfordshire.

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And after several years doing that, I saw a job here in the department in

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this field that I study and I thought, oh, I'll give it a go.

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And here I am, very lucky.

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Growing up, did anyone work in education?

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No.

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My father was an intellectual property lawyer and my mother was a housewife, I suppose is the term, certainly the term she would have used.

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But my parents prized education.

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My father used to make a joke about what we were going to end up doing

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or becoming as adults when we were children.

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And he used to say, you can do whatever you want after you finished your PhD in physics.

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And we knew that was a joke, but it was a signal to us that you have to get your education.

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Yeah.

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And so he was very committed to the importance of education, as many people are, but nobody in my family actually worked within that discipline.

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So your research examines cross-linguistic relationships across linguistic systems in the emergent bilingual child.

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Why that area?

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Well, I'm very interested in this notion of, as I said earlier, how children become multilingual or bilingual.

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And there was a big debate in the research literature about whether and to what extent when someone is learning two languages at the same time,

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whether those languages are separated in the mind of the individual or whether they start off meshed together in a single system and then over time get separated out by the individual.

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And this is in the context of children.

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And most of the evidence suggests that when young children are learning two languages or more languages at the same time, they are learning separate linguistic systems in parallel.

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However,

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there is also a lot of evidence to show that they influence each other.

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They interact with each other and speak to each other.

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And one of the things I think that has fascinated many people in our field of applied linguistics is when does that happen?

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And when will it be a facilitative phenomenon where whatever influence language A is having on language B will help in some way?

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And when might it be an inhibitory kind of influence where whatever happens in language A might lead to certain errors when you produce language B, for example.

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And so understanding the way in which different linguistic systems interact and trying to identify and understand when that can be a positive versus when that might be a negative,

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not only helps us understand better the sort of theoretical constructs of what it means to be bilingual and how the mind is making sense of that and organising that, but also has really direct applications, specifically in education.

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So if we had a better understanding of some of those ways that languages interact with each other, we might be better prepared in the classroom context to support

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children when they are learning these languages.

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That's something that interests me.

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It's a fascinating thing.

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I've got a personal perspective, which isn't around children, but my husband is bilingual and we have a lot of conversations around this.

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It's really fascinating.

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And as you say, then the impact on education and how to support those children.

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Yeah.

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One of the biggest projects that you're working on at the moment is the LiFT project, which is the Learning in Families Through Technology Project.

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Currently in its eighth year, I think, and funded by Ferrero.

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Tell me a bit more about that.

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Yes, so I was fortunate enough to be in the right place at the right time for this when representatives from Kinder

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came to the department several years ago. They had made an app which they wanted to have some experts in child development have a look at so that we could give guidance on that.

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And I was one of the academics in the department at the time who was able to get involved with that.

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And that was initially a three-year project.

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But over time, that particular app they came to us with at the beginning sort of disappeared for various reasons.

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And they commissioned a game company, a game developing company called Game Loft to make a whole new app.

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And we were able to secure further funding to keep the project going and use this app as a kind of research platform to understand better how we can design applications for young children to enable them to have maximal educational value.

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One of the things that's really important in the context of this project is that, as most people would understand,

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more and more children at younger and younger ages are spending more and more time in front of screens.

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And there are definitely some indices that this is a problem, particularly if the child is very young.

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But one of the reasons why it's a problem is because most of the experiences that they'll be having will not be very rich.

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They will not have a great deal of educational value in those applications.

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There's a tremendously high number of

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applications marketed to young children that state that they are going to support learning in this way, that way, and the other way, but there's absolutely not a shred of evidence to support those claims.

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So we're very committed on the LiFT project in trying to understand better how we can support learning through digital applications.

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And we've been focusing on different domains of learning.

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One, of course, is language, which is no surprise given what we were talking about before.

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And this is an app that's available to children all over the world.

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It's also available, I think, in 19 different languages.

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And so

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The language question and language underpins everything we do, both as children and learning in school, but also in life as adults.

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So one of the first things we did was we developed a game in the app that was specifically targeted at supporting children's vocabulary learning.

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We did that and we did a sort of small scale RCT around that to see whether or not it was impactful,

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Did it actually had an impact in helping children learn vocabulary and I'm happy to tell you that it did, which is great.

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Another area that we've been looking at in the LiFT project is creativity.

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And that's because, again, creativity is something that is sort of a phenomenon that is very highly correlated with academic achievement.

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And again, what we want in an app is to be able to create opportunities for children to develop and express their creative instincts.

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in a way that is manageable for them.

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And then the third sort of main area of work in the LiFT project relates to what we're calling joint media engagement.

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And this is extremely important.

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This is being led by my colleague, Dr.

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Sandra Mathers, who's an associate professor in our department.

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And this is a really important area because, of course, digital technology often serves to isolate people, at least isolate people from sort of the real world, not the digital world.

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And when you're a young child developing, the interaction that you have with your caregivers, ostensibly your parents, but it can be grandparents, older siblings, aunts, uncles, teachers, et cetera.

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That interaction is absolutely fundamental in supporting the child's learning and development.

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And yet, if they're spending more and more time sitting on an app by themselves, they're losing those opportunities to have that kind of interaction with an older caregiver type person who would in turn support their learning.

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And so they're missing out on those learning opportunities.

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So the joint media engagement work that Sandra Mathers is leading on the LiFT project is really all about trying to identify ways that we can put features in apps like the one that we're working on with Kinder to promote parents or caregivers interacting with children at the same time, essentially co-play when they're playing on these games so that children don't miss out on those really important opportunities.

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And then the final area that's really important that's being led by Dr.

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Sara

00:14:14 Speaker 2

Ratner in our department is on something called Let's Story, and it's looking at fairly short stories that are generated by AI within the app.

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And we were supporting Kinder in trying to put this new space in the app together and Sara was instrumental in that.

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But now that it's live, we are carrying out research to look at children's learning and engagement with these texts to see how that does or does not

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support their certain aspects of language and literacy development in particular, but also creativity and also joint media engagement through interacting through texts and stories.

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Is there hope that over time you'll be able to influence these apps and just keep improving the educational value of them?

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Absolutely.

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So the hope with the LiFT project in particular is that we can

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offer Kinder and Game Loft specific guidance that is based on evidence that we have generated to enable them to constantly be refining their app so that it's constantly maximising the educational value and potential of that app for children and families.

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But as much as we're enjoying working within this particular app, we feel that our research is generalisable to apps in general and we certainly going forward are interested in

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developing new research projects that support families and children playing and learning together through several different types of apps.

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So it's not just about this one app, it's about understanding better the levers and barriers to learning and development through playing on these apps.

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And developing new apps or developing new versions of old apps that have the kinds of features that we know from our evidence base are supportive of children's learning.

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And this is for younger children and for all children, not just bilingual children?

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That's correct.

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It's for younger children, ostensibly between the ages of three and eight-ish, or those young at heart.

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Why is this so important to look at now?

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Because we live in a digital world and this generation in particular that we're looking at, these are digital natives in a way that certainly someone my age is definitely not a digital native.

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These are people who are really spending so much time in the digital world that it's critical that we ensure as much as we can that what is available is maximizing children's learning and development opportunities.

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because as I said earlier, more and more children, even at younger and younger ages, are spending time in front of screens.

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And frankly, at one level, that's not a problem.

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I'm not saying we shouldn't allow children to play on screens because as I just said, it is a digital world and this is going to be, this is a fundamental part of living in our current world is to be able to navigate through all of these spaces.

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But the real concern is when those rather isolated experiences, when you're at a crucial foundational moment in your life, when you're four, for example, when poor quality digital experiences are displacing

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high quality, rich interaction that you could be having with your parents, your siblings, your grandparents, et cetera, that's when we're going to get into big trouble in the future.

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So I think what we're doing now in this project is really vital.

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And also it's not just support and development for the child, but also the caregivers, as you say.

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I wouldn't have a clue necessarily what might be a healthy app to be using and what might not be very educationally rich.

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And so there's presumably some work to be done there in terms of reassurance as well for caregivers on what they're doing?

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100%.

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And this is one of the things that we've been talking a lot about in the LiFT team, that parents are,

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for good reason, completely confused.

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There really isn't an evidence base out there that we can rely on to use to guide parents as to what they should and shouldn't be looking for.

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So ultimately, what we want is to be creating and contributing to that evidence base and then creating opportunities for families in particular to be able to take advantage of what we've learned from our research.

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In fact, what we are hoping to do in the coming years is to develop new projects where the parents are integral in collaborating with us in terms of developing our shared understanding of the successful features that support co-play in children and therefore in turn that support children's learning.

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So we're looking at ways to implement those sorts of projects in the future.

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Thinking about taking a wider view again now, back to your career, what would you say have been your highlights personally?

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Is that a hard question?

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Oh dear.

00:19:19 Speaker 2

Oh gosh, that is a hard question because I'm one of those perhaps very annoying people that feels very, very fortunate to be in the position that I'm in and I've had to have had the career that I've had.

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I've had many wonderful experiences, but I suppose if I was to generalise, I think coming here to this department 21, oh, 21 years ago here.

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I mean, I enjoyed my academic career before coming here, but coming here enabled me to have a whole range of experiences that I hadn't yet had before.

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And I think in particular,

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the highlights really relate to the people, which is always the way, isn't it?

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It's the people you work with.

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And by that, I mean, first, perhaps the students, because the students that we have here in our department and in the university more broadly are...

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are just fantastic and so inspiring.

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And I've enjoyed working with them so much and I have learned so much from them as well.

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So I feel really grateful for having had the opportunity to work with such wonderful, brilliant new people, fresh people to work with, you know, and sort of support them in their own learning and the development of their own careers.

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But I suppose the other highlight is the academics as well that I work with in the department, in the wider university, and also the field in general.

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I mean, most colleagues are fabulous.

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And one of the things I've enjoyed about being head of department is to get to know more people, a sort of broader range of people that before I became head of department might not have interacted so much with, and I've had more opportunities to do that,

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learn about different things that go on in the department and the university and the people.

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And the people are just amazing.

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And going back to your question about the podcast and helping us understand why we're such an important department of education in the national and international landscape, I would say it's because of the people.

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It's really because of the people and they are brilliant.

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I'm just very grateful to be among them.

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If you could do it all again, would you do anything differently?

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No, I don't think so.

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I think I would try not to get so stressed.

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If I could go back and tell my younger self, give my younger self some advice, it would be don't get so freaked out about everything and it will all work its way out somehow.

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It will be okay in the end.

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It will be okay in the end.

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I wouldn't have believed me though.

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I know, I know.

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So sadly, your tenure as director is actually coming to an end at the end of this calendar year, which we're all very upset about.

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I'm really curious on your reflections on how you found it as a role and how it's felt to have that sort of contribution to the department.

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Well, first of all, that's very kind of you to say that.

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No, it's not just me.

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Lots of people are.

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That's very kind.

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I think it was quite daunting at the beginning.

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Even though I had experience of being the deputy director of the department before then and being on the senior management team on PRC and departmental board and all of that, the reality of being the director is a completely different experience, which despite

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being prepared in some ways, I wasn't prepared for in other ways.

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So it was a huge, huge learning curve.

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And I'm grateful for everybody's patience while I was learning and I'm still learning.

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But as I said before, the main thing for me when you make a big decision is, it going to expand your world or is it going to diminish your world?

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And I ended up putting myself forward for head of department because I thought it would expand my world.

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And boy, oh boy, it did.

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And I learned a lot of things.

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I learned things about the department,

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I learned things about the university and the sector, the discipline, but also myself, which I think has been really important.

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And I have also felt enormously privileged to

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be the figurehead of such an amazing department.

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As I said before, the opportunity to work more closely with such brilliant people and to try and support the wonderful projects that they're working on and developing and the fabulous programmes that we have in our department and supporting our students and just working with

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everyone really to try and just make a really great thing even better, which I think we have done over the past four years.

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There's been lots of growth and important developments that have put us in an even stronger position.

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And that's thanks to everyone.

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And I just feel, again, very privileged to have been in such an important position in this department and university for the time I have.

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And I wish our new head of department, Professor Leon Feinstein, who starts

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in January, all the very, very best and I'm sure that he'll be brilliant in the role and I hope that he has the same kind of positive experiences that I have had.

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And any bits of advice for Leon walking into the position?

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Just do your best is really all that you can.

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I think one of the things that we have to understand in taking on positions like this is that they're really positions of service.

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And it can be a difficult position because it's service to your colleagues in the department, but it's also service to division and the university.

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And sometimes you can feel a bit sandwiched between the two.

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But I think understanding that, that's your role is to serve the department and not necessarily yourself is important, but I'm sure Leon knows that already.

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He's certainly had important positions in his past that have led him, to where he is now and I'm sure will hold him in very good stead.

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So I suspect he doesn't really need any advice from me.

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The good news is, we should clarify, you're not actually leaving the department.

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No.

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So you'll be going back full time to researching again?

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Yes.

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Will it be with a sigh of relief, a feeling of you've completed your tenure?

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What will that initial emotion be when you

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finish?

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Or do you know?

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I think at one level there will be some relief, that would be a lie to say there would be no relief because being head of department is a full-on position and so many things come your way, so much of which is not necessarily factored into your day.

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For all the best will in the world, you can have organised your timetable brilliantly, but then something comes up and you have to deal with it immediately.

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So

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there will be some relief in that respect.

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And even though, as we were just talking about the LiFT programme, I've been able to maintain quite an active research agenda while being head of department, that is 100% down to the amazing team of people who are in the LiFT team.

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I've just been so grateful to have been able to work with them.

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That's because of them, really, that my research hasn't died in the last four years.

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But I'm very much looking forward to

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an opportunity to think a bit more.

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I feel with the amount of work that I've been dealing with over the last few years, I feel I haven't really had a lot of time to think as much or as deeply perhaps as I would like on certain research issues in particular.

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So I'm hoping that during my sabbatical, I'll have the opportunity to really think more deeply about some of the things that I'm interested in and

00:27:05 Speaker 2

to maybe develop some new projects.

00:27:07 Speaker 1

Changing tacks slightly, just thinking about education as a sector, what are your biggest hopes for the sector and what are your biggest concerns?

00:27:18 Speaker 2

Oh dear.

00:27:18 Speaker 1

It's possibly a big question.

00:27:21 Speaker 2

Yes, it's a very big question.

00:27:23 Speaker 2

And I'm not sure that I'm best placed to answer that.

00:27:26 Speaker 2

I think there are so many things that are a concern ranging from issues that people in our department are already investigating very carefully, which relates to teachers, teacher recruitment and retention.

00:27:40 Speaker 2

The power of an individual teacher cannot be overstated.

00:27:44 Speaker 2

And I'm sure most people have experiences for both good and bad of individual teachers that have profoundly influenced them.

00:27:52 Speaker 2

And we need more fantastic teachers, professionals.

00:27:57 Speaker 2

And I think it's really important for us to understand the levers and barriers, again, to support brightest minds going into the profession.

00:28:08 Speaker 2

I was very struck several years ago when I was at a college dinner with a student on our PGCE programme.

00:28:15 Speaker 2

And he was, he hadn't even finished his PGCE, but he was telling me about his exit strategy from teaching

00:28:21 Speaker 2

that he was going to do his PGCE and then he was going to work as a teacher for several, three to five, years and then he was going to leave.

00:28:29 Speaker 2

And I just, I mean, hopefully he didn't, hopefully he enjoyed it enough and he found it so rewarding that he stayed.

00:28:35 Speaker 2

But I was very concerned that before he'd even begun, he had already decided that it was not a profession that he wanted to stay in for his career.

00:28:45 Speaker 2

And I think that is a huge problem and is evidenced by the retention

00:28:51 Speaker 2

crisis that we have in the UK at the moment.

00:28:55 Speaker 2

And I think what I would really love is for teachers to be more valued.

00:29:01 Speaker 2

All of the research and education speaks to the incredible power and influence of the educational experiences for shaping our society in the future.

00:29:11 Speaker 2

It is arguably one of the most important jobs in any society is to educate our next generations.

00:29:19 Speaker 2

And therefore,

00:29:21 Speaker 2

it is an incredibly noble profession.

00:29:25 Speaker 2

And I think teachers need to be recognised in a way that perhaps they are not, certainly in this country anyway.

00:29:32 Speaker 2

So that is something I would really love within education for us to change and influence over time.

00:29:38 Speaker 2

And certainly we're making some progress in that area.

00:29:43 Speaker 2

But at the same time, I think the positives about education are also the same thing that's the problem, which again goes back to what I was saying earlier.

00:29:50 Speaker 2

It's all about the individuals that we are able to recruit brilliant people into education, not just in terms of future teachers.

00:30:00 Speaker 2

I mean, our PGCE programme here at Oxford is obviously outstanding as per Ofsted.

00:30:07 Speaker 2

And every year we're able to recruit a fabulous cohort of people and support them in their endeavours to become future teachers.

00:30:16 Speaker 2

And we also have a suite of programmes that support people who are currently teachers, but all the other programmes which support people doing research in education.

00:30:25 Speaker 2

And all of that work just makes me feel good because I think, and our department is one example of many departments across

00:30:34 Speaker 2

the nation, but also across the world who are doing the same thing.

00:30:37 Speaker 2

So we are really in a better position, more so now than ever before in terms of understanding how to support learning in classrooms and in the wider context and how to influence policy and how to support the workforce and all of these things.

00:30:55 Speaker 2

We know more and we have an evidence base that needs to grow further, but

00:31:01 Speaker 2

from that evidence base, we can really make some important decisions and hopefully influence those decisions in governments, for example, to improve things.

00:31:12 Speaker 1

That moves us on seamlessly, actually, to talking about the next episode.

00:31:15 Speaker 1

I'll be speaking to Luke Brewer, who is a current teacher, and he actually completed a course here at the department.

00:31:21 Speaker 1

So we'll be getting his thoughts on teaching as a sector.

00:31:25 Speaker 1

Your research takes you all around the world.

00:31:28 Speaker 1

And I'm curious, you just referenced there about with a UK lens, thoughts on more of a global lens in the education sector.

00:31:36 Speaker 1

What are the differences you see in different education systems?

00:31:40 Speaker 1

And is there anything we should be learning from?

00:31:42 Speaker 2

Well, I think when you do this podcast with some of our colleagues in comparative and international education, they'll be in a much better position

00:31:50 Speaker 2

Than me to answer that question.

00:31:53 Speaker 2

Obviously, I have experience in having been educated in North America and Canada where I grew up.

00:31:59 Speaker 2

And of course, now I'm living here.

00:32:01 Speaker 2

My own children were educated here.

00:32:03 Speaker 2

But as you say, I have travelled around the world and I've been lucky enough to visit schools and meet teachers around the world.

00:32:10 Speaker 2

I'm trying to dodge your question because there are, I'd say that

00:32:16 Speaker 2

a lot of educational systems have their good and their bad

00:32:19 Speaker 2

and ours is no different.

00:32:21 Speaker 2

We have good and we have less good, but so does everywhere.

00:32:26 Speaker 2

And again, I think it's really fundamental to empower teachers.

00:32:32 Speaker 2

And what I would really, really like to support more is the role of evidence within education generally.

00:32:41 Speaker 1

Yeah.

00:32:41 Speaker 2

Some people refer to teaching as an art, and there may be an element of it as being an art, but referencing back to the research that I was talking about before that goes on in this department, for example, it's this evidence base that we are creating as academics who work within education

00:33:00 Speaker 2

that needs to get to the people that matter the most, i.e.

00:33:03 Speaker 2

the teachers, policy makers, resource developers, and families, to better support the learning of the individual child.

00:33:12 Speaker 2

And it worries me, for example, when I...

00:33:15 Speaker 2

I meet students in our department who are brilliant.

00:33:20 Speaker 2

They have, obviously have done extremely well.

00:33:22 Speaker 2

They've gotten into Oxford.

00:33:24 Speaker 2

And then they have no idea, for example, that all of the research on learning styles in education suggests that when we subject different learning styles to empirical scrutiny, we can't really find any evidence for it.

00:33:38 Speaker 2

Like it's a basic thing.

00:33:39 Speaker 2

People believe

00:33:41 Speaker 2

that learners come in different flavours and everyone has their own learning style.

00:33:45 Speaker 2

And as teachers, we're supposed to understand this and cater to that.

00:33:48 Speaker 2

But actually, when you do the research to look at the evidence to support that, there isn't much or indeed any.

00:33:55 Speaker 2

And I remember telling students here at Oxford this, and there were audible gasps in the room.

00:34:01 Speaker 2

They were so shocked that they didn't know that.

00:34:03 Speaker 2

And I think that tells me something about how our research is not

00:34:10 Speaker 2

getting to where it needs to be.

00:34:12 Speaker 2

And so the role of evidence in supporting practice and the profession and ultimately the learning of the students in schools is, I think we can do more.

00:34:25 Speaker 2

We need to do more to help make sure that the evidence has a more prominent role.

00:34:30 Speaker 1

Why do you think they don't know that?

00:34:31 Speaker 1

Why is that?

00:34:32 Speaker 2

Well, there's a lot of these so-called, I guess, tropes is maybe a word that might describe that about everybody knows it, right?

00:34:39 Speaker 2

Like you think you know it for yourself.

00:34:41 Speaker 2

Like I like things when I can read the words versus when I hear the words or whatever.

00:34:45 Speaker 2

So I'm a visual learner versus, you know, you might have this belief about yourself.

00:34:50 Speaker 2

And so when you're in a class and you're getting a degree in education and someone says, yes, people have different learning styles, you go, oh, yeah, that makes a lot of sense.

00:34:58 Speaker 2

It's perfectly logical.

00:35:00 Speaker 2

But this is why we do research in the first place, because, at one point, if you just look out the window and you look at the sky and the terrain, the world is flat.

00:35:09 Speaker 2

I see right now no evidence that I'm on a globe

00:35:14 Speaker 2

spinning in the universe.

00:35:15 Speaker 2

I'm just looking out the window and everything seems pretty stable and pretty flat.

00:35:19 Speaker 2

And it's only through looking at the evidence that we learn that it isn't.

00:35:23 Speaker 2

So we have to be challenging our assumptions all the time.

00:35:27 Speaker 2

And I think that's why we're all, even though in this department, we all do sort of different research, we're united by that, I think.

00:35:35 Speaker 1

Yes.

00:35:35 Speaker 2

That we want to better understand our particular areas.

00:35:39 Speaker 2

We want to challenge assumptions.

00:35:41 Speaker 2

We want to make sure that the evidence base is robust enough so that when we are in a position of influence to suggest to policy makers or to teachers or to parents, you know, what might be more or less effective, that we can do so from a place of confidence based on robust evidence that in part we create here in the department.

00:36:02 Speaker 1

And it's something that historically we've not been as known for in terms of our research, but actually we're one of the leading departments nationally and globally

00:36:10 Speaker 1

and

00:36:11 Speaker 1

we want to keep building on that, right?

00:36:12 Speaker 1

But it's through things like this podcast where we'll start to get some of those key messages out a little bit more.

00:36:17 Speaker 2

Yes, I hope so.

00:36:19 Speaker 2

And this is why it's great that you're doing this, Heather.

00:36:22 Speaker 2

Thank you.

00:36:23 Speaker 2

But yes, I think we've been really good at just quietly getting on and being brilliant.

00:36:29 Speaker 2

We need also to be more maybe not so quiet about what we're doing so that more people can benefit from what we are doing.

00:36:38 Speaker 1

Thoughts on AI in education?

00:36:41 Speaker 1

Love it?

00:36:42 Speaker 1

Hate it?

00:36:42 Speaker 1

Don't want to talk about it?

00:36:44 Speaker 1

Can't stop talking about it?

00:36:45 Speaker 2

Oh, well, I think it's an issue for sure.

00:36:50 Speaker 2

I think trying to avoid it is futile.

00:36:53 Speaker 2

It is here.

00:36:54 Speaker 2

It is in the world and it is in education.

00:36:58 Speaker 2

So pretending that it isn't or just saying it's really bad and we shouldn't be using it or something, I think is really naive and frankly irresponsible

00:37:08 Speaker 2

because it's there and it's something that we have to understand and get to grips with.

00:37:14 Speaker 2

And it can actually be a really powerful resource to support many different things, but many things in relation to learning as well.

00:37:24 Speaker 2

And the university has some initial good guidance about how students, for example, might be able to use AI to help them with their writing and so on.

00:37:34 Speaker 2

But as

00:37:36 Speaker 2

related to what I was saying before, what we don't have, in my view, and I wouldn't call myself an expert on AI, though I know probably more than the layperson about AI and education, is that we don't yet have the evidence base to really, you know, doing really good quality, robust research takes time.

00:37:55 Speaker 2

AI developments are happening at a faster rate than we can do the really good, robust research.

00:38:02 Speaker 2

So we're a little bit behind the curve in terms of what's coming up in AI developments and what we currently know.

00:38:07 Speaker 2

But I really think we need to be better understanding the nature of learning and children's experiences with AI in particular.

00:38:15 Speaker 2

I work with a colleague in the Department of Experimental Psychology who works on the development of social emotional development in children.

00:38:24 Speaker 2

And he and I were talking about this really important question about children's development of

00:38:30 Speaker 2

a social understanding in the world and how does that get impacted when they are interacting with AI, which for all intents and purposes is acting like a social being with real emotions, but in fact is not.

00:38:44 Speaker 2

What is the impact of that on a child's own development and understanding of social and emotional aspects of life?

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And we don't know the answer to that.

00:38:54 Speaker 2

And that's just one example of something that's really profoundly important in my view, but we don't have the evidence for yet.

00:39:01 Speaker 2

Even though, as I was just saying, that we don't have a lot of research in the area of AI, we do have a lot of activity in our department to try and address this really big gap in what's going on in this space.

00:39:13 Speaker 2

And we have a very exciting

00:39:15 Speaker 2

hub of activity called the AIEOU Hub, which stands for AI in Education at Oxford University.

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And it's being led by Dr.

00:39:24 Speaker 2

Sara Ratner.

00:39:25 Speaker 2

And it was supported by the Social Sciences Division.

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And it really reflects Oxford's commitment to addressing this really urgent need to develop an evidence base in terms of AI and how we will use AI in education.

00:39:40 Speaker 2

The goal is to establish a dynamic and inclusive community of different types of people from different spheres in the world to engage critically with developments in AI, but also to positively shape the ways in which we can use AI, we can develop it and evaluate it.

00:40:02 Speaker 2

And it's really been a hugely successful area of activity in our department.

00:40:07 Speaker 2

It now has a network of over 2,000 people from, as I said a moment ago, from lots of different parts of lots of different sectors, not just academics.

00:40:17 Speaker 2

And it had a very successful conference that was hosted earlier this year in September.

00:40:23 Speaker 2

So it's a very exciting space in the department and one that I know is going to really help us set a humane

00:40:30 Speaker 2

ethical and research-informed agenda around AI and how we should be using it in education.

00:40:36 Speaker 2

So I'd say AI, it's not a question of love or hate.

00:40:39 Speaker 2

It's a question of living with and understanding better.

00:40:44 Speaker 2

And better understanding so that we can use it to our advantage rather than feeling like our AI overlords are soon going to be running the show.

00:40:56 Speaker 1

What would be your

00:40:58 Speaker 1

best piece of advice to an early career researcher who wants to emulate your career?

00:41:03 Speaker 2

This is a very tricky question, Heather, because things change over time.

00:41:07 Speaker 2

And the career and the opportunities that I had several decades ago are not the same ones that people have now.

00:41:17 Speaker 2

I remember talking to one of my undergraduate thesis advisors about, you know, whether I should do a graduate study.

00:41:23 Speaker 2

And he was saying, well, of course,

00:41:25 Speaker 2

in my day, if you got a PhD, you were guaranteed a job and that's not going to be the case for you.

00:41:30 Speaker 2

And so, I think for each generation it changes.

00:41:33 Speaker 2

So I don't know that I would feel super confident in telling an ECR, this is what you need to do to be able to end up as a professor at Oxford.

00:41:42 Speaker 2

But I would say follow your passion.

00:41:45 Speaker 2

I would say try to do research and investigate issues

00:41:50 Speaker 2

that really inspire and stimulate you because trends come and trends go.

00:41:59 Speaker 2

And while there's probably, AI, we were just talking about this huge need for people to be researching AI and that probably won't go away anytime soon, but

00:42:09 Speaker 2

we still need all the other stuff.

00:42:11 Speaker 2

If you're not interested in AI, that's okay.

00:42:13 Speaker 2

Don't try and make yourself an AI person if that's not who you are.

00:42:18 Speaker 2

Explore the things that really stimulate and motivate you.

00:42:22 Speaker 2

I think time management is also really important.

00:42:25 Speaker 2

And I think just in terms of making sure that we have time to do all the different things that we need to do professionally, but also making sure that we have time to live and enjoy our lives, because I think it's really easy

00:42:38 Speaker 2

when you are young and you're trying to develop your career to just focus entirely on the career and then forget yourself.

00:42:45 Speaker 2

And I think lots of the initiatives that departments like ours have now, we're much, much more aware of the health and wellbeing of ourselves as individuals and the pressures that our professional lives put on us and the importance of looking after ourselves.

00:43:04 Speaker 2

So I would encourage ECRs to follow your passion, work hard, try to balance your life so that you can enjoy yourself and look after yourself.

00:43:18 Speaker 1

Thank you so much.

00:43:19 Speaker 1

We've come to the end of our time together, but that's been absolutely fascinating and I really appreciate your time today.

00:43:24 Speaker 1

Thanks so much, Victoria.

00:43:26 Speaker 2

You're very welcome, Heather, and thank you so much for inviting me.

00:43:29 Speaker 1

Not a problem.

00:43:29 Speaker 2

Pleasure, as always, to talk to you.

00:43:32 Speaker 1

Find out more about our department and Victoria's research projects on our website, education.ox.ac.uk.

00:43:40 Speaker 1

You have been listening to Education Explored, a Department of Education podcast.

00:43:45 Speaker 1

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