

Episode 8 – Jason Todd

Transcript

Heather Sherkunov

Welcome to Education Explored, the Department of Education at the University of Oxford podcast. We've launched this series to explore all things education, from teaching to research to finding out why we're one of the leading departments in the country and the world. I'm your host, Heather Sherkunov, and this is episode 8 and the final episode in series one of the podcast. Today I'm delighted to be joined by senior departmental lecturer in History Education, Dr Jason Todd. Jason teaches on our History PGCE programme and the MSc Learning and Teaching course. Formerly a teacher working in a variety of London schools, Jason is currently also a researcher heading up the Empire Migration and Belonging Project. More on that we'll talk about later. Hi, Jason. Thanks for joining me today.

Jason Todd

Hi, Heather. Pleased to be here.

Heather Sherkunov

So I wonder if it would make sense after reading some of your personal history, whether we actually go chronologically, chronologically.

Jason Todd

I am a history teacher.

Heather Sherkunov

Makes sense, right? So you're a child of a Malaysian mother and a British Army officer father. A lot of your early childhood was actually spent travelling the world, so places including Singapore, Thailand, Iran and Surrey. Walk our listeners through some of those early childhood memories. What was it like to travel so much?

Jason Todd

So I mean, the key context, I mean, and then it is formative in terms of my research now. So I'm going to start with my dad and then I'll talk about me. So my dad goes to, he's born in Blackpool. He goes, joins the British Army. My mother and my dad are both post-war babies in a way. And my dad goes to Malaysia in the 1960s, meets my mother. And then I come along a few years later. And those sort of formative experiences, I think, just not consciously, but subconsciously, they're informed by empire. Why is the

British Army in Malaysia anyway? That's the first big question. Why does my mother want to marry a white man? You know, and that's complicated by ideas of empire and migration. So that my experience there is I think it was a good education in many ways. It meant that I was constantly on the move. I had to make friends quickly because we never stayed anywhere for more than two years. I ate A lot. That was great. So I had this sort of great introduction to masses of global cuisines, which I really enjoyed. But then the deficit of that is my education was slightly unstructured. So I was never formally taught, for example, the rules of written grammar, because none of the teachers knew that the previous teachers had never taught me that. So you're kind of, yeah, as well as moving from Singapore to Thailand, then Thailand to Germany, et cetera, et cetera, you're moving from school to school. And on a social basis, I got a good social education because you're having to make do and, you know, engage. but maybe I lacked a little in terms of the formal progress that a teacher who you would have more consistently over a period of time would actually sort of say, oh, Jason needs a little bit of this or yeah, there's a little bit missing here that we need to sort of support. So it was those sorts of things that kind of were formatively in terms of how I end up here in terms of being interested in both education and also being interested in empire. Still interested in food?

Heather Sherkunov

I don't know if it's a good time to say this. I'm Blackpool, born and bred too.

Jason Todd

Are you? Oh, brilliant.

Heather Sherkunov

Might be related.

Jason Todd

Yeah, could be. I always find that sort of connection because that's the other thing is that we all have those migration and empire stories in a way and that you just, it's through talking that you start to realise that it's a small world rather than a big world.

Heather Sherkunov

It's a childhood, as you say, that's taking you all over the world and what an amazing opportunity and what amazing experiences you must have had. Do you think you had any sense at the time of whether you felt that you could fit in anywhere because of that? Or was it more the opposite where you felt you weren't sure you did fit in anywhere? You know, I'm wondering about that sense of belonging.

Jason Todd

Yeah, there's a story that my mum tells me, which I, yeah, I don't know how true it is because it's one of those memories. So she talks about Singapore didn't have any real television. There was no BBC, there was no, but there was television and it was mainly American television. and she talks about coming into the living area and seeing me kissing the television. This is also where we might have to cut this, but anyway, that I'm kissing Michael Jackson. And the reason I'm kissing Michael Jackson is because I've seen a brown man. So although there's all this enabling about being on the move and being in these sorts of contexts, there's also I mean, I'm not aware of it when I'm 8 years old and kissing Michael Jackson on the television, that that's a form of me trying to make sense of race. But that is, as I look back on my childhood, that is a way in which those ideas of belonging, of being there and belonging at sometimes and then actually feeling an outsider at other times. And that particularly came to a head when I went to secondary school. So all of those formative years up until 10 or 11, where I'm talking about my education being much more peripatetic. By the time I get to 11, we come to the UK in 1976. It's the heat wave, the last one before this one. But it's also about to be the anniversary of the Queen's 25th Silver Jubilee. And there's a Jubilee party in, and this is, because we're military, we're in Gosport, Portsmouth. So it's a military town. And I'm dressed head to toe in a Union Jack trouser suit. And it's kind of like I'm just, I'm like hyper British in this particular moment. And then again, I'm sort of thinking, is this my mum worrying? about me fitting in and using the Union Jack thing as a way of saying, he's as British as the next person. But actually, I was the only brown kid on that street party. So it's kind of that sort of, and equally even going back, and again, it's not a story I remember, it's a memory that I've been given, but when I'm born, my grandmother in Blackpool phones my father, she's delighted, she's got a grandson, but her first question is, how dark is he? So you kind of got these sort of, these things are happening. And then equally with my mother, my memory of my mother is, I found these old photographs and my mother's in a beautiful sari in Blackpool because my grandfather ran the Blackpool Odeon. So he was a person of note. My mother and my father are there for a local press sort of outfit and gig. And she's wearing a sari. I never remember my mum wearing a sari at all in my youth and in my teenage years. And I kind of wonder whether that was adopted initially and then dropped as a way, as she starts to encounter forms of racism on army bases and or in Britain. she's thinking, I want to be less Asian, I want to present as less Asian. So not wearing a sari, cuts her hair, starts to wear very, very, you know, much more conformist clothing, hypes up her English accent. So she becomes like really Queen's English, you know. So her voice changes and the way her intonation changes and things like that. And you kind of wonder at some level, is this about her? And then for me, then as her child, is it also about me? And I, going back to the Portsmouth School, I think loads of things were happening there that I didn't understand of racism when I was experiencing them. My father was somebody I couldn't talk to about that because he wouldn't necessarily understand that as a white man. And I'm not sure my mother even understood it as somebody who

was born in Malacca and is then experiencing racism herself and then also potentially her son is also experiencing that as well. So I'm not saying that my life was awful, but there were moments, and it was only until I did cultural studies as a degree, an undergraduate degree in University of East London, that I started to look back on those events and sort of think, well, here's another way in which I could understand what happened when I'm having yet another fight on the playground. It is through the lens of race, yeah, that actually that sort of thing about belonging. And there are loads of kids who, you know, I was I was friends with, but there were also teachers and also kids where there was lots of angst and confrontation.

Heather Sherkunov

Did you ever speak to your mother about any of that?

Jason Todd

No, because I think part of the, I mean, partly it's boarding school. So I'm also not with my parents. And partly I think it's also like things would happen, particularly with school teachers that might be interpreted as race that I didn't want to talk to about. with my mum or dad because I felt I was the one at fault. So the idea of going as a 12 year old and saying, this teachers, we had corporal punishment. So I got, in the first year of boarding school, I was caned every week. Now I don't think I'm a horrendously bad boy. No, I'm sure not. But and again, what was that all about? And one way of looking at that again is race. But I wouldn't go back to my mother and say I'm being caned every week because at that moment I think I am a bad boy.

Heather Sherkunov

No, that really.

Jason Todd

Does that make sense?

Heather Sherkunov

Yeah.

Jason Todd

So it's that sort of sense in which I'm making sense of it, but with no, and yeah, there were not many young people in my school who were racialized as black or brown. Yeah, it was mainly a predominantly white school. So there weren't other peers in which we were sort of trying to make sense of this going through. So it wasn't until later that I thought actually one way of understanding this. And like I say, it's one way. I'm not saying it's the only way that determines what was happening there, but it was one way in which I could.

Heather Sherkunov

When you were in the early childhood travel around the world and some of the experiences that I've read, lots of memories of trips with your father to islands off the coast of Malaysia, peninsula, exotic animals, all these different things, it sounds like some sort of amazingly adventurous childhood. Did you think about belonging then or did it just sort of seem like the norm at that point?

Jason Todd

I think that just felt normal, you know, just going So the incident you're talking about, I went, there's an island off Malaysia called Politim and my dad took me on a trip there with the army. So we were, there was a range of little boys and their dads and we would go swimming and see sharks and turtles and dolphins and yeah, that, we do that every week, right? So that felt kind of normal.

Heather Sherkunov

And how old would you have been?

Jason Todd

So that was when I was 8. I've got a picture of him and I just sort of coming back with our snorkelling trip and it was great, yeah. So that felt normal. Swimming in monsoon drains, that felt normal. Sort of clearing out snakes from the monsoon drains before we went swimming in, that felt normal. Yeah, so, and that's I think about both the social capacity, but also, you know, that actually my aperture for new experiences was set there. Yeah, I've always been up for doing something new and yes, there are these undertones around race and belonging, but there's also these brilliant experiences that I'm being enabled to have through this travel. And I'm sure I wasn't thinking as an 8, 9, 10-year-old that, yeah, maybe this isn't normal. Maybe other eight-year-olds aren't going swimming in this lovely water and seeing these incredible creatures. But I was with other eight-year-olds who were having that experience. So that was my norm.

Heather Sherkunov

And do you remember at that sort of time what you wanted to be when you grew up?

Jason Todd

I mean, when I got to secondary school, I did start thinking about what I wanted to be where I grew up, but I don't think I was doing that when I was in Malaysia and Singapore. I think I always liked, I thought there was two possible options. One, that I might be a cook because I was cooking, yeah, there's a Malaysian word called makan. I mean, it's all Malaysians do. It's like they, if there was an Olympics in eating, they would win all the gold medals. But so I, was cooking, my mum was a cooking, but also cooking and

food became a way of telling stories about history. So you would get certain ingredients and my mother would say something about my grandmother based on that ingredient because it would evoke a memory for her, which she would then pass on in real time in the kitchen with me. So cooking, being a chef, something like that, was kind of one thing. And then the other thing, so going back to my school experience in secondary, because I was having these experiences in the first year where I was literally having a fight every week, I just became really good at sport. So I was in the rugby team, I was in the football team, I was in the cricket team, I did all the sports. And that was kind of a way to belong. So when I kind of got to 16 or 17, I thought I was going to be a PE teacher. which, and then, and then that didn't happen.

Heather Sherkunov

Still teaching, still education though.

Jason Todd

So it was still education. So education was there. And my mum was also somebody who taught. So my dad, obviously was doing his army work and my mum would do teaching English and that sort. So she's always been an, you know, would describe herself as an educator.

Heather Sherkunov

So you find yourself, after all these amazing experiences all over the world, coming back to a strict Catholic boarding school in Portsmouth, the culture shock must have been quite big. How did you find that?

Jason Todd

Well, yeah, I mean, it was big. And I think, so my dad was not religious. My mother was brought up a Catholic. Again, another colonial legacy is that Catholic missionaries went to Malacca and converted people in Catholicism. But my mother wasn't particularly religious. And I think part of the reason she left Malacca and married my father was to get away from from that regime, particularly as a woman, because it was very patriarchal, it was very gendered. But they thought that going to a Catholic school would be a good education. So that was the principle, not a Catholic education, but it would be good and it would give me a good start and things like that. And it was a culture shock. But again, like I say, in the second year of the sport, in the first year, I just did lots of, I was an altar boy, I was in the choir. So again, my strategy to deal with the culture shock, which was what was evident, was to in for a penny in for a pound, right? Yeah, so I'm just going to dress up, right? I get some clothes. I get to dress up as an altar boy and wave some incense. What I didn't want to do is just sit there in a mass and I wanted to get involved. It wasn't because of any great sense of faith. It was just more

using the rituals that were open to me to kind of get involved and get used to what this experience was.

Heather Sherkunov

If you could go back and speak to your younger self before the point at which you go to boarding school, what would you warn them or on the other side say, you're going to love this?

Jason Todd

I mean, I wouldn't warn them because I don't want people to think that I had a terrible secondary education because I enjoyed a lot of my secondary education. But I think it's about, like I say, I think the thing is how, as a child, do you have the tools to understand what is happening to you? And it comes back to what education is for and what it could be for, is that we want to give young people tools to understand their experience, right? So I suppose I would have said to my 10-year-old self, try and find those tools, try and find those people who can help you see the world in this complicated, but also analytical way.

Heather Sherkunov

After leaving school, you find yourself in a residential special school in Kent for children with physical disabilities. And then you go on to do a philosophy course at night school. You later retake your A-levels and you go on to do a cultural studies degree in North East London Polytechnic. Why did you feel that urge to get yourself back into education and stay in education?

Jason Todd

So I think And again, let's go back to my secondary. And actually, what I didn't think about is that question to my 10-year-old self is self-belief. So I think one of the things I cultivated at school was to be a people pleaser. But that was both a positive strategy, but also a potentially detrimental strategy. And I think what I'd learnt from school, the hidden curriculum was telling me, that I was very nice, but not very bright. And up until I went to that night school and started doing, redoing my A-levels, I believed that story that was being told to me by my school experience. Yeah, so again, all my reports, no report ever said he was, I was never bad behaved, I was never a troublemaker or anything like that, but I was never a high flyer. I was never getting the gains or the outcomes. And equally, my parents didn't challenge that either. They didn't want to put pressure on me, those sorts of things. So I guess I was 18, 19, working in Kent in this residential school setting. And I hadn't really thought that anything other than this must be true of my destination. But doing the night school suddenly made me think, I actually quite like, because I will, even during school, that's the other thing about both primary, my primary years and my secondary years, is I was always a reader. So the other thing

about making friends, there were also times for me and my sister where we had loads of time with no television, with no friends, And I just read and read and read. So I made these imaginary worlds to be in, as well as this other world that I was in, the real world that I was in. And I guess going back to night school reminded me that I like reading. I like thinking. I have ideas. I want to pursue them. So I then suddenly started to think, okay, I want to do something a bit different. I want to actually pursue a degree, which I thought previously was a door that had been shut to me. because I failed all my A-levels. Suddenly it became open to me, partly because I was telling myself a different story of who I was and partly because I was a little bit older and education started to mean something to me. So yeah, that's kind of, does that answer your question? I think it does.

Heather Sherkunov

Yeah, it does. Yeah. It's also interesting because it ties in with one of our previous episodes. We were talking to Carol Brown about educational assessment and we were talking about this feeling of being so young and potentially being such a graded and then just feeling like you're forever more that grade.

Jason Todd

And you're potentially crushed by that experience. It's very hard to work against that.

Heather Sherkunov

Yeah. I wonder whether because of your adventurous upbringing, your adventurous nature, whether that also made you explore that, whether that thinking was right for you. Because I do think it's very brave to go back into education when you think you're not, you've got this idea that you're not that bright, but you've soared with it. I mean, one of the most interesting things about your story, I think, is that you failed or you didn't do very well in your A-levels originally.

Jason Todd

Well, I did. I failed all of them except for one. And even in that one, I got an E. So, yes.

Heather Sherkunov

Well, you failed your A-levels and then you find yourself as a leading academic in a department at the University of Oxford. That can't just, I mean, you obviously, you clearly had all the skills when you were younger and the intelligence. So it's fascinating to me that you broke through and just ran with it.

Jason Todd

Well, I think that comes from that informal education that is about, okay, formally, academically, I didn't necessarily feel confident at the age of 16, 17 to 18, and I was

believing those stories. But that didn't mean to say I felt crushed, because I still felt confident with people. So I still felt able to communicate with people and that had been given to me by my non-school peripatetic education where I'm having to go to these islands and do all of this sort of stuff. I wasn't sort of sitting there as an 18-year-old crushed by the experience of education. I still felt I had something to offer, but I hadn't thought it was through formal academic study. I thought I could find it in a different way, but I didn't know what that was at 18, but so night school became the place.

Heather Sherkunov

How did the experience of doing cultural studies, your degree, how did the experience influence your understanding of your own upbringing?

Jason Todd

Well, completely and utterly and brilliantly. And the other thing, maybe before I go into that question, is going back to the previous question, is that the other thing about what they were doing. And obviously, this is polytechnic education, which is no longer available to people. And our course, I mean, I was a mature student by this stage because of the failure and because of, doing work at residential settings. But this higher education institution existed for people like me. So I wasn't the only person going there in my late 20s. There were people who were there in their 50s. who in some ways the formal education system had failed them. And here was this institution giving them a second chance. It was saying, I'm not interested in your pieces of paper. What I'm interested in, or the formal grading that you were talking about in terms of assessment, what I'm interested in is the way in which you talk, the way in which you think, the way in which you, the questions that you have about your world and your society, Now I never thought until I did the cultural studies degree that asking that biography mattered. So for example, in formal education that I'd experience, someone like me doesn't matter. It's all about great men and predominantly great white men. Now suddenly it wasn't just that there were women and there were other people's voices in this particular story, that actually my story might be a legitimate focus for academic study. my experiences might be a legitimate focus for academic study. So that whole context set things up as well. But we also went exposed to, so the course was structured, the three-year course is trying to understand Englishness through the tools of English literature, philosophy and history. So it began in the 17th century in the first year, then came to the 20th century in the third year. It was influenced by the work of the Birmingham Centre for Cultural Studies led by Stuart Hall and Raymond Williams. And that was all about sort of thinking about what culture is. And again, it was about inverting this idea that culture only exists in elite forms like opera and things like that. It also has popular music can be, again, a valid form of study. We can look at songs, we can look at the Beatles, we can study them as legitimate forms of inquiry. So suddenly I was thinking, wow, this is amazing. Everything's up for grabs. But also the forms that we were using. Yeah, I kind

of think at Oxford, so following George Floyd and Black Lives Matter, there was rightly a call in higher education to decolonise the curriculum. And most universities started looking at their reading lists and thinking, who are we asking our students to study? But none of them were really asking questions about assessment. Whereas in cultural studies, I was writing essays, but I was also making music. I was making tape slide, I was making radio. I was doing all the, and they were seen as legitimate forms of assessment. Now, that's 1988. And that seems radical today, even in a decolon. Yeah, we are still marking essays. That's the predominant form of assessment we're using with undergraduates and postgraduates. And it's very logocentric and it's very European and it's very located within a particular idea of knowledge. So here I was thinking, oh right, so I can write a song about modernity and post-modernity. And it's not that I didn't write an essay, I wrote an essay to go with my songs, but the songs enabled me to think through these complex terms and then in turn write about them. So kind of just giving me this range of tools and then again, yeah, using to start to understand what have I just been through in the last 20, 25 years?

Heather Sherkunov

In the 1980s, in the late 1980s, you were living in the East End of London. I wonder if that landscape had any influence on your sense of identity.

Jason Todd

Yeah, hugely, because I think, so if I go back to the tools, yeah, one of the tools and one of the presiding spirits of cultural studies was Stuart Hall. And Stuart Hall talks about race as a floating signifier. So this idea that it's not a fixed meaning, it has multiple meanings across time, and across space. Now being in the East End of London doing cultural studies, reading about Stuart's work about floating signifier, I'm walking around with my brown skin and I'd go into a classic East End pub and in that space I'd be acutely aware of my brown skin because I'd be the only brown person in that space. But if I then went down the road to go to a restaurant and predominantly run by Bangladeshis, They knew that despite us sharing a brown skin, we are not the same people. We have different experiences. So that whole idea that actually, because although I have those racialized experiences, they're mediated through quite a lot of privilege because I didn't have, I had access to resources. My father and mother were never wanting for income. I didn't migrate here because of partition. I had a lot of agency through my family. So that sort of sense in which that floating signifier Even going down East Ham High Street, I could go into two different places and feel racialised in two different ways. And so that was really sort of dynamic in relation to sort of starting to think through in an everyday setting what it means to be racialised is not always going to be the same. And equally sometimes events. I mean, I can talk about when I was a school teacher. So I'm in a mixed London setting. This is an all-girls school, state school in South London. On the 6th of July, England had just got

notification that we'd won the Olympic bid for 2012, and we'd beaten the Parisians and the French. And part of the reason why we had beaten, the IOC stated, is that Britain's bid was much more culturally diverse than France's bid. In our school, the kids were really excited, they were really pleased and really happy. The 7th of July, the next day, there were the bomb attacks on the London buses. And suddenly I came into the same school and children cleaved to their identities in a much more different way. They weren't mixing in so much. So for example, I'd go to a classroom and there was a group of Muslim girls all sitting together talking about what had happened. and thinking about their identity in a totally different way to what they were thinking about their identity the day before, where their cultural diversity was being celebrated, now they were feeling their identity as British Muslims was being questioned, either explicitly or implicitly. And just literally within 24 hours, what it meant to be a British Muslim had changed. And that shows that dynamic of what it means to belong and not belong and how we always sort of reformulating and rethinking about those questions.

Heather Sherkunov

In those moments when something like that, so groundbreaking happens and you see the groups of students, is there anything you can do to help that scenario?

Jason Todd

I think you perhaps as a teacher you try and do two things. You need to recognise that they need those spaces. I don't want to disabuse them of those spaces and they need to have those spaces to try and make sense of it as well. Then they need other dialogic spaces. They also need a space with you as the pedagogues who are in that space as well to share their sense of unease, their anxiety and things like that. And then perhaps possibly when you think they are ready and on their terms, you start to build dialogic spaces across those different groups. so they can repair some of the perceptions that perhaps are going on at that particular time. What you don't do is ignore it. I think you have to recognise that something has happened here and that means that sometimes maybe the formal curriculum needs to be abandoned. The formal curriculum needs, or the formal curriculum needs to be deployed more dynamically to address the questions that the present moment is demanding of these young people. So, but that's a longer term you can do that on in on. in the short term, but you can do that in the longer term. So, for example, we decided we needed to do more work on the Muslim presence, not just in Britain, but globally. So we introduced a new module on Mughal India and thinking about medieval Baghdad. So that those, there was a sense in which students from that Muslim community, but also from other communities, knew how complicated this Muslim identity was and how dynamic and changing it was. So that was our contribution as a history curriculum, is to start to give all those pupils a sense of that complication and that sort of sense of dynamism and Stuart's floating signifier. Why does it change over time?

Heather Sherkunov

For 19 years you were in different schools in London teaching before coming to the University of Oxford. Why the change?

Jason Todd

So 10 years into the 19 years of teaching, I felt that I was getting a bit stale and I went and did a master's at, am I allowed to say University College of London? You're allowed. Okay. And that was great because I remember going up every Thursday night feeling utterly jaded from a teaching week and then going bouncing into school on Friday morning because I felt energised because I'd got, I'd come back to ideas again and there were people from who are teaching history in Kenya and Ghana, all this international sort of dimension. After 19 years, I think I needed something a little bit more like I had with my master's education after 10. And I suppose, Heather, I'd always thought I'd go back into the classroom. This thing about belonging and identity comes up again here. So partly it's there because I'm thinking, oh my goodness, I'm in Oxford, you know, I'd come from the polytechnics of East London. And yes, I had a degree, but is that something that people at Oxford recognise? A degree from Polytechnic of East London, that type of thing. So that sense of being an imposter, which is well documented and things like that. But also just an identity, because even the doctoral cohort, I was much older. There's all these brilliant Stanford, Harvard, And they were just so whip smart. They were able to spin pens on their thumb in a way that I thought was really dexterous and amazing. But they were also able to contribute really quickly. And I suppose what I'd learned as a, what was I then, a 45 year old, was I was far less sure of the answers in a way that looking at these 25 year olds from Harvard, I was thinking, how are you so sure? And it took me a while to recognise that hesitancy as a quality rather than as a deficit, because I thought that that's what Oxford expectation was, to be whip smart and contribute and give a quick answer. And I still have moments of, what am I doing here? How do they let me in, that type of thing as well. But it's less. And there was that thing about identity, because so the thing I think I really enjoyed was the PGCE and teaching our cohort of history interns because, but then that kind of distracted me because I was comfortable there in a room with 20 history interns talking to them about teaching than I was in the Bodleian Library reading books and writing a chapter for my supervisors. So I kind of, I'll do this and I'll go back into schools. Anyway, I never did.

Heather Sherkunov

You're the co-lead investigator on the EMB project, the official name of which is a portrait of the teaching of the British Empire, migration and belonging in English secondary schools. Tell us about that research.

Jason Todd

I'll give you the origin story first. So there's a regular conference that happens in Leeds, which I'm going to again this year, called the Schools History Project. And I was sitting at a plenary with some teachers, and the plenary was from a group of academics. who'd set up something called Our Migration Story, which still exists. It had its 10th anniversary recently. And this was an online resource where academics and teachers have contributed to enable teachers to access resources about Britain's migration story. And Malachi Mackintosh and Sandeep Nidner, who were leading on that project, asked me about the work, and we did some sort of research on the teachers who liked the project and found it valuable, but consistently were saying resources by themselves are not enough. In order to have the confidence to teach these topics, we need more training, we need more understanding, and those things underpin teacher practice in the classroom. I knew about the Centre for Holocaust Education, And their principle is that, so you take a sensitive topic like the Holocaust, which isn't straightforward to teach. And what you do is you try and give confidence to teachers by having a real embedded understanding of what is actually happening in the classroom, but also a really clear understanding of the scholarship around the topic that you're teaching, so anti-Semitism, the Holocaust, that type of thing. And I felt that offered a really good blueprint, albeit that empire is a very different topic, But the sense of sensitivity resonated. So I said, well, actually, why don't we look for something similar in relation to teaching empire, migration and belonging? And migration, so fundamentally the project is really about empire, but the ways in which migration and belonging are framed by Britain's history and its imperial history, rather than it being about empire and migration. There's lots of other forms of migration. that aren't framed through Britain's imperial past. But these debates are really, really important. And actually, again, unlike the Holocaust, I keep on talking about stories, but the story that I think Britain tells itself around the Holocaust is one that they're comfortable with. That we had a role in the liberation and that, I think the story is more complicated than that, but that's why I think there's a much more of a public appetite. And if you're teaching the Holocaust, I don't think anybody from the right or the left is going to sort of say, you shouldn't be teaching this. Whereas the empire, which I would argue is even more fundamental to understanding our society, is so much more contentious. Because it, particularly now in terms of the public discourse, there's a real sort of contestation about how and why we should be teaching it. And our research picked up on some of this as well. But then I would argue that is also why we need this research. So the first stage of the research was really to sort of establish over a three-year period, what is happening in schools? What are the issues that teachers are dealing with? What is the appetite that young people and teachers have for this topic? You know, how is it playing out? And that's kind of where we ended up, because then if we have that understanding, then we can establish professional development that's rooted in the realities of school classrooms, rather than professional development that is imposed on teachers, but actually that has no understanding of what is actually happening in their classrooms. What our

research shows is how this plays out in so many different ways. So I think depending on whether you're in a, I don't know, a Tower Hamlet school where you've got lots of students of third or second generation Pakistani, Bangladeshi, Indian students in that community who've got their own family histories about partition, about the Bangladesh war, and they're bringing those into your classroom. Or you're teaching somewhere else where there's a predominantly white community, and you might be getting hostile parental pushback because you're sort of saying, why are you teaching this negative portrayal? Which may not be actually what you're doing, but that's how it's being translated within a public discourse. So there's people hyper vigilant around what it means for identity and things like that as well. So what we're realizing is that actually if you are going to offer any support for teachers, it needs to attend to the real complexity of the topic. So this is a topic that spatially reaches across virtually every continent of the world. And temporarily, starts internally with the colonisation of Wales, Scotland and Ireland. So we're talking 1500s to the 21st century. So you go back to my dad, my dad went to the Falklands. In my lifetime, I can only really begin to understand that in some ways through an imperial lens, that actually, why has Britain got an island that needs protecting 8,000 miles away in the South Atlantic? That's a colonial not even a canonical legacy, that's a living legacy because it's happening still in the present moment. So it's much more that we need to sort of attend to. And then, like I say, that really plays out. So if I was teaching in Carterton, one of our local schools, where you've got a high number of RAF children, forces children, there's a real range of different things you need to think about as a teacher. Then if you're teaching, if I go back to my Tower Hamlets example, that means that the teacher supports, really got to be thoughtful and careful. And also it's going to be dynamic. If I go back to my July the 6th example and July the 7th example, if that transformed that sense of Muslim identity across a 24-hour period, I mean, I taught empire when I was a school teacher, but I don't think I ever felt I was under a culture war pressure, whereas I think I would now. I think, how's this going to go down in my community, in my local community? So, and that might change again in five years time, because we don't know what's going to happen over the next five years. So it's not, again, one-size-fits-all, because actually we would need to continue the work to find out how things, how present day events start to reshape our understandings of this history and how contentious or fraught it is for people to teach it.

Heather Sherkunov

What do you hope the outputs will be?

Jason Todd

If I talk a little bit about the method, we surveyed over 3,000 young people across the country. We surveyed over 1,000 teachers across the country. We surveyed historians. We've done some really more deep, qualitative research with case study schools in lots

of different parts of the country, working with teachers and young people in those sorts of settings. So there's a lot of rich data there. And we found lots of examples of really enabling practice. I'm not going to say good practice, because good practice means different things in all those different regional contexts, but enabling practice. So what the report tried to set out was a set of key findings, and those key findings established that young people and teachers think this really matters and they want to do it. But only 16% of our teachers said that they think that the empire is currently taught well. So that this really, that's quite damning. So yeah, you've got both teachers and young people sort of saying, we want to learn about this, but teachers themselves saying, we cover this, but we don't think we covered it nearly well enough. And what that points to is that the second two sections of our report, we have a set of principles that we've offered teachers about the curriculum and how they might think about the curriculum, about their pedagogy, but also about their professionalism. So there could be one answer to this, which is to say, if teachers knew more about this really complex topic, they would teach it better. And that's true to an extent. But it's not the whole story, because what we also found is that teachers need what we call relational expertise, because you could know quite a lot about this through a formal education sort of setting. So let's say I'm a non-Irish teacher, which I am, and I'm teaching something about early plantation in Ireland in the 17th century. But my relational expertise, I know a lot about this topic. I've read around it. I might even have studied at university. But I've got a couple of students in my class who've got Irish ancestry. And all my formal education may not prepare me for the relational expertise that I'm going to need to think through what their community familial memory means in this particular setting. So you need these sort of professional dispositions to be able to be open to young people and consult with student voice and actually make sure that you're not doing harm in relation to that, to think about your own positionality within the classroom. And then the other hope that I have is in the third section of our report, which is we have a set of recommendations because if we believe, and I strongly believe this and it's there in our data and it's there from the historians, that this is a really important topic and that without an understanding of this topic, we don't understand modern Britain. We don't understand modern Britain's place in the world. We don't understand the way in which other places in the world view us as British people. If it's that fundamentally important, then it can't be down to a few heroic teachers doing some really brilliant things in their classroom. There needs to be structural support to enable not just those teachers, but also, so Margot, who's the chair of our advisory board, who's a professor of history at UCL, she talked about there's people who are in the water, and we've spoken to a lot of those people, and that's where some of our principals are drawn from. And then there's people who want to dip their toe in the water, and then there's people who are afraid of going in the water. And we need to do work with those two other groups in a structural, systematic way that supports not individual practice, but systemic practice. So going back to the relational expertise, we can't just have a principle of actually you need to

think about your own position and young people's position. One of our case study findings was that when a teacher taught a topic around the transatlantic slave trade, that wasn't contained in that one hour history lesson. Sometimes in some of the schools that was then enacted outside in the playground. And that then in turn became a safeguarding concern because the students racialised as black were being deployed in a very particular way after that particular lesson. So that means there's implications for our headteachers about how they support both the teacher in terms of getting the professional development that they get, but also in terms of thinking about the pastoral care that is needed in a school when you start to think about topics that are emotionally freighted by what's happening in the classroom, things like that. So there's those sorts of structural things. But equally, teachers talk to us and we're in the middle of a curriculum and assessment review. And they talked about how, so at the moment, the GCSE in history currently frames British history in a very narrow way. Whereas British history, as my biography at the very least starts to illustrate, is a much more global phenomenon. So we need examples to have the freedom to start to define British history in a much more globally connected way, and then in turn design assessments that actually reflect that much more meaningfully. So there's that sort of structural change. And then the last sort of structural change that's needed is we go back to the Centre for Hours Education. We've been funded to do research, We know a lot more than we did three years ago about what is actually happening in school classrooms, but we still haven't got a nationwide cohesive structural response to actually enable both teachers, but also broader public understanding. So we worked with libraries and museums on this. We worked with community groups on this as well. There's a lot of activity But it's not brought together, and there's huge regional disparities. If you're a teacher in London, there's possibly more that you can access than if you're a teacher, or you're aware of those opportunities in a way that a teacher in a different region may not be aware of those opportunities. So there's a real role to coordinate what's happening, to build a bigger picture together, and yeah, to give teachers in the sector that structural support to do this really important but complex work.

Heather Sherkunov

Presumably a lot of that is also massively dependent on the political landscape.

Jason Todd

Yeah, And yeah, who knows what's around the corner? But I mean, I think the political landscape was very much shaping some of those teachers who are maybe worried about going to the water. And some of our teachers were sort of certainly saying that they were worried about being accused of doing a particular disservice or woke history and things like that. So those terms are not enabling teachers, they're not enabling teachers to do this sort of work. Because the one thing, the 70 historians who did our survey, so this is 70 historians of imperial history, they disagree on a lot and that's great.

And education should be about where the disagreement is. But what they agree on is that empire is a complex phenomenon. So what we don't want to do is tidy it up for young people. We want to keep that messiness, we want to keep that contention and things like that, but do it in ways. And that political discourse, I think, is also, I think it's partly a combination of political discourse and social media. And another strand of our work showed how a lot of young people's ideas both came from their family and their communities, but also came from online settings. That's not just what they're learning, it's also how they're learning online settings where I used to be on X, I'm no longer on X, because the nature of the conversational X is so binary, it's so adversarial. And so I suppose that question about the political climate, it's not so much who are political leaders, what party it might be. It's how do we as a society start to find ways where we can disagree well. rather than disagree badly. So there still has to be space for disagreement, but space, I'll go back to the dialogue that I was talking about with those girls. We still need to find those dialogic spaces where we can sort of say, okay, I still disagree with you, but I understand what the root of that disagreement might be. I understand why you're seeing this topic differently to how I'm seeing this topic, rather than a binary thing about saying I'm right and you're wrong. And I think a lot of the way that the social media is, it does encourage that type of binary thinking. So we're up against that and we need to sort of think about, yes, I'm less sort of thinking politically about who the party might be, but more about how do we frame a public conversation where we as adults, never mind young people, can actually disagree well.

Heather Sherkunov

Yeah. You also co-lead on the Traction training platform, which focuses on teaching race, belonging, empire and migration. Tell our listeners a little bit about the platform.

Jason Todd

Traction's based on an ERC proof of concept grant. It emerged from a project that I collaborated with Nandini Das and the Runnymede Trust, which is the Tide Beacon Fellowship. So the idea behind the Tide Beacon Fellowship is 12 teachers would have three kind of master classes looking at the themes of transcultural understanding in the context of empire and race. And we went to lovely places like the National Archives and we looked at things like the 1381 Windsor Treatment, which talked about outsiders, you know, then, you know, in Portuguese outsiders in that particular case. And then we gave them access to experts in those fields, academic experts in those fields. In between each of those 4 master, 3 masterclasses, they had online forums. And they were curated, again, by the experts in the field. So they had literary extracts, historical extracts, and then what we called creative extracts. So they could be objects or porcelain vases and things like that, told a particular history. And that was, that Tide Beacon Fellowship was very much focused on the 17th century, very cultural studies. It's all about philosophy, literature, and history. And how do we understand Britain's

place in the world through those lenses? So, an English teacher thinking about Shakespeare and rereading Shakespeare through the lens of the historical documents we've given. But equally, a history teacher started to think, oh, maybe I can think about ways in which the Tempest can be better understood through the history that I'm teaching, that type of thing. And then Mandini, who was the PI, applied for the ERC fund. And what we've now done is we've kind of scaled that Beacon Fellowship up. So there's an online modular course for, at the moment, mainly targeted at English and history teachers, but I want to work, because these topics, that again, going to the EMB project, they're there in geography, they're there in RE, they're there in citizenship. So we will want to sort of develop it. But at the moment, there is now 4 modules, one in the 17th century, which came from the tide, one on the 18th and 19th century, one on the 20th and 21st century, and then one on pedagogy. So we were keen that, again, this can't simply about, I now know more. And that is important because what we found is that it gives teachers a bit more confidence to think, I know what I'm talking about because I know how race was understood and formulated in the course of the First and Second World War, for example, because I've listened to the talk that Santanu Das gives as part of traction. And that's given me a little bit more confidence about introducing this and talking about this in the classroom. But the pedagogy module is kind of a way in which you're sort of saying, again, it's that thing about not good practice, but practice. And practice has to depend on the context that you're in. That's an individual context, how confident do I feel as an individual teacher. But it's about mapping the classroom. Because all our schools, partly their demographics are different. but partly their journeys are different. So there might be a school in Bristol that's really far down the road and thinking about these issues, been doing this work for 5 to 8 years and they've got a good course, teachers and good collaborations. And then there's another school further down the road that's just starting this journey. So they have to start the pedagogy module where I do an introduction to sort of thinking about how you might think about race. Then they go to the subject modules. They choose whichever one they want. And then they come back to the pedagogy module, where they do what I call context mapping. So now that I know this new stuff about race in the First and Second World War, based on what I've read and heard from Santo Ludas, what might that mean in my school in Tavistock? What might that mean in my school in Tower Hamlets? What might that mean in my school in Liverpool? Rather than us saying, so this is how you teach it. And partly that's really, really important because We want teachers to be agents as well, not for us to say, this is a solution. It goes back to my cultural studies experience. Here are some tools that are going to help you negotiate your context and think about how you implement this within your particular context. And one of those dimensions might be, think about who your allies are. Think about, you know, how is this going to be received by your parents. Think about how you communicate this to your senior learning team. And do it before you teach it so that if there is flak from the parents, the senior learning team know what you're doing, but more importantly, they know why

you're doing it. So if it's been misrepresented and the first port of contact is the deputy head trying to fend off some hostile parent, they can sort of say, well, that's not exactly what the history department are doing, because they know what you're doing. And like I say, they know critically why you're doing it. So yeah, that's what Traction's trying to do. It's got those four modules. It's kind of beautiful. There's videos as well as text. I think the other thing I should say, Heather, is it's free. So any teacher in any part of the world can actually do this and engage with it and hopefully learn from this and maybe sort of pick out people to learn with alongside. So we do know that some departments have done it as a collaborative exercise. So although we don't have that platform as part of the collaboration of the dialogic space, you could say as a head of department, we're all going to do traction and we're going to then create meeting time where we talk about what the lecture was or we divvy up different modules and sort of engage with it and then we use that as a way of rewriting what we're doing in the classroom.

Heather Sherkunov

Yeah, it's a fantastic resource. Check out our website for more.

Jason Todd

Yeah, good.

Heather Sherkunov

Taking a step back for you personally, what have been the highlights of your career?

Jason Todd

I think the highlight is always, and there'll be multiple examples of this, but it just comes down to that moment of being with learners and whether those learners are, I don't know, a young boy with muscular dystrophy, you know, who I was working with 30 years ago to a PGCE student who's just finished a course. And again, it goes back to that rational expertise, because I think for all of those learners, I think the one thing that I find rewarding is when they get stuck, they've got people like myself, I hope, that kind of give them that space to get stuck, but not to feel like they've got no parachute at all. And that I can sort of enable them to get stuck and learn from that being stuck rather than go in the abyss and never come out. I think why is that rewarding? It's also rewarding because it's selfish because all of those moments with those learners is also a moment where I can do more learning because that's the dynamism of the job. Yeah, what I was doing here when I first came to Oxford feels so different to what we're doing now. So it's technically I'm still doing the same job, but schools have changed, young people have changed. So yeah, I think it gives me an opportunity to learn and no two days is ever the same.

Heather Sherkunov

And what's next?

Jason Todd

I mean, I think the most important thing is it goes back to trying to create some kind of hub that brings together this work in a coherent way that helps this country understand its imperial past in all its complex, controversial, difficult ways. Because until we have that public conversation, I think we're not going to, I think it's one of the things that's holding back British society. is not confronting that. I mean, there's no guarantee, there's a James Baldwin quote, something like, not every difficulty that is confronted can be surpassed, but if you don't confront the difficulty, it can never be surpassed. And he's talking about American race relations in the 1960s. I think the same happens here, is that actually, unless we start to recognise this complex phenomenon, it's going to continue. Paul Gilroy talks about melancholia, it's going to continue to haunt us. that we don't put it to bed. And it's like a family. If the family, all our families are complicated, we've all got a dodgy uncle somewhere, but we need to, we don't hide them. Do you know what I mean? We've got to try and, that is part of our family story, that is partly of part of who we are, because human beings are complex and difficult and flawed individuals, and therefore the state that also is also going to be flawed and complex. So I think My work isn't done. I feel as though the EMB project is the beginning rather than the end point. What our research says is that Oxford could act as a hub, but we need regional partners to kind of work in a sensitive way rather than a Oxford. Oxford knows all the answers. So we're going to go tell you what to do in Liverpool or Blackpool or whatever. No, we need to partner with people in the Northeast, partner with people in the Northwest, find out what's going on the ground, work together to support the public understanding. And I'm using public understanding because I think this is a bigger conversation. So what's happening in schools, you mentioned it in terms of the politics, happens in a broader ecosystem of public understanding. So it's happening in museums, it's happening online, it's happening in the political discourse. So we need to really sort of think about that into play because children aren't coming into the classroom with blank, empty minds. They've already got ideas of what they think empire means, of what they think it means in terms of migration and belonging, of who they think belongs and doesn't belong. And we need to better understand that whole ecosystem of public understanding.

Heather Sherkunov

Sounds like you've got a lot of work to come.

Jason Todd

Yeah, absolutely.

Heather Sherkunov

Thank you so much for speaking with me today. We've run out of time completely, but what an absolute pleasure.

Jason Todd

Thank you so much. Thanks for the lovely questions.

Heather Sherkunov

You can find out more about Jason's work, the Traction platform and more about our department on our website, education.ox.ac.uk. And that's it for series one. Join us again next time, which will be in the new academic year, which will be October for series 2 of Education Explored, the Department of Education at the University of Oxford podcast.