

## Series 1 Episode 1

Young people, aspiration, and practitioner bias: A Conversation with Neil Evans



[00:00:00] **Lesley:** Hello and welcome to the Portal Podcast, linking research and practice for social work. I'm your host and my name is Dr Lesley Deacon.

[00:00:13] **Sarah:** And I'm your other host and I'm Dr Sarah Lonbay. So we hope you enjoy today's episode.

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### Introduction to Episode 1

[00:00:28] **Sarah:** So hello and welcome to the first official episode of the Portal Podcast. I'm here with Dr Lesley Deacon and Mr Neil Evans, we'll do some proper introductions in a second. We're here to talk to Neil about his CASS paper and I'll let him explain what it's about shortly. So before we get started, I'll let Neil give us a proper introduction because you already know me and Lesley.

[00:00:52] **Neil:** Yes, I'm Neil Evans, senior lecturer here at the University of Sunderland. I currently teach on Health and Social Care, but I've had experience of teaching career guidance students here at the university, Social Work students, Childhood Studies students and probably some other students as well.

[00:01:12] **Lesley:** Loads of students.

[00:01:13] **Sarah:** Lots of students. Well thank you for the introduction and we're really thrilled to be chatting to you today about your paper, which Lesley and I both really enjoyed reading, and I think we're going to have a really interesting discussion today. So before we get started properly, could you just give us a brief overview of what the paper was about just in case any of our readers haven't... listeners, you're not readers you listen...

[00:01:35] **Lesley:** I was gonna do that as well. I thought readers.

[00:01:38] **Sarah:** But they're not readers they're listeners. If any of our listeners haven't read your paper, I think it would be really good to frame the conversation by just having a snapshot of what it was about and we're gonna get into some of the detail in a bit.

[00:01:50] **Neil:** Okay. Well, I mean the short version of the title is about aspirations and it's about impartiality and it's about guidance practitioners. And it's about the role that guidance practitioners have in their work that's supposed to be impartial, with young people and adults, but in recent years, a kind of an agenda, which is about raising aspirations, and so the paper explores what we mean by aspirations. It explores when we say "raise aspirations", what do we mean by that? But it's also, I suppose, in a sense, it's a kind of a dialogue. It's about a dialogue between a practitioner and *primarily* a young person, because that's most of my experience, most of my experience has been working with young people, but it's relevant to adults and I've worked with adults as well. But I suppose aspirations tends to be something that's more... talked about in terms of young people rather than older people, but I think it's actually relevant for adults as well.

[00:02:54] **Sarah:** Yeah, I definitely think the ideas in the paper are relevant for adults. And I think there's a lot in there that's really relevant for social work as well, which is what we're hoping to really explore with you today. So why are you interested in this area now?

[00:03:06] **Neil:** Well, I suppose my professional background is that I was a careers advisor for many, many years, and then a manager, a trainer, so I've been in career guidance for almost 30 years, I suppose, and I taught here at Sunderland University, it was the MA in career guidance, so as well as being a practitioner I'm really interested in how people are, in a sense, trained or educated in providing career guidance. And what really fascinated me always was, as a practitioner and as a trainer educator, whatever you want to use, how we actually choose what we do in life. It just absolutely fascinates me because, I don't know, I read somewhere once there's something like officially 20,000 different job titles in the UK alone. So how does any person choose one of 20,000? So it just fascinates me, and what really interests me is how people are influenced to make that choice and what those influences are. And there's lots of material out there about what the influences are, that parents are very hugely influential, teachers are influential, other adults influence, your siblings

can be influential, where you live can be influential, your skillset is influential. There's a multitude of things that influence what we choose and it just fascinates me, and it always has. And in terms of aspirational stuff, I'm a kind of a product of someone who looked at me and said, "Neil, you can do better than what you're aiming for". You know, that was obviously many, many years ago now, and I'm thinking, oh, that was great. And I'm really grateful for that person. But actually I kind of want to look at it from the other side now, I'm thinking, but is that always a good thing? That actually someone actively pushes someone into something?

[00:04:59] **Sarah:** Yeah, I think your paper unpicks some of that in quite an interesting way. I think Lesley's got a question for you.

### **What is impartiality and can practitioners be impartial?**

[00:05:06] **Lesley:** Yeah, because obviously when I was reading it, I had my little social worker hat on when I was looking through it, so I was sort of pulling out, well, what do I think out of what you'd written? Because we've had many conversations, haven't we over the years, because we've worked together for quite a long time now, about the sort of similarities between what we've done, but with a different focus in the practice area. I just wondered if, would you mind just, there's three terms that I think would be good to just sort of pull out? So one of the terms that I pulled out through the article was **impartiality**. What do you think, what does that really mean?

[00:05:44] **Neil:** Well, I mean, I think I've put something in there about a definition of it, but I suppose in a sense it's not taking sides, it's trying to present... if you're working with people, it's trying to deliberately *not* influence them in one way or the other. I mean, for me, in my professional background, the classic example would be working with someone in year 11 at school, for example, who says "I want to do A-levels, but I don't know whether to do them here at the 6th form or at the local college", and being impartial, me being the impartial person would be just to talk through those options.

Being *partial* would be possibly – only possibly because I know they don't all do this – but it might be a 6th form tutor thinking "oooh, we'd like to keep this young person at school so we're gonna try to encourage them to do their A-levels here". That's a kind of almost stereotypical kind of example, but I suppose being impartial is not taking sides. But that's really difficult, because I

might not *deliberately* take sides, but I might say something inadvertently and not mean to influence them, but it will influence them.

[00:06:55] **Sarah:** Yeah, sorry, that's really just making me think about the role of advocacy and how they work with social workers, because the term that tends to get used there is **independence** rather than impartiality, but from what you're saying, it's the same thing. So the advocate's role is to be independent, to listen and to represent the person's views, is that the same thing?

[00:07:14] **Neil:** Yeah, it is. I think it's similar. When I think about impartiality it's about trying not to influence one way or the other. And it's about making sure that if someone says "I'm thinking of this", or "this is what I think", putting the other side, in a sense. From a personal point-of-view I've always kind of sat on the fence anyway, you know, I like to sit on the... I'm quite an indecisive person if I'm honest. So I like to sort of see both sides to the story, and I suppose impartiality is trying to... but then I'm influencing someone to think about something that they'd maybe not have thought of, so it's a contradiction, in a sense.

[00:07:54] **Lesley:** It is very hard. Because when I then think about it, I think, well, in child protection, when you're going into a situation, what you've got to be trying to do is letting the evidence lead you rather than actually what you *think* about it, or what your personal perceptions are, and there's a lot in social work isn't there about trying to address your... be very reflexive? Because I think **reflexive** is one of the terms you use as well, about what it is you bring into that. And so how, how can you... I mean, I go round and round with this as well... can we really be impartial?

[00:08:26] **Neil:** I don't think we can, and I sometimes think I don't want to be impartial... my influencer, if you like, was a teacher at school. He deliberately was trying to encourage me to go into higher education to do a particular, well not a particular course, but I was saying just before we came on air, I was saying that I actually applied to do law at university, that's what I wanted to do, I didn't get the grades, and so I thought, ah right well, I'll get a job then. Because I'd failed, in a sense, to do what I thought was, you know, a prestigious course... but he said, well, you can still go to university. And I said, well, yeah, but what would I do? And he said, well what do you want to do? And that was the first time I'd thought about what I wanted to do. He really meant, just that question: what do you want to do? You wanted to do law, but

if I'm honest, that wasn't me. It was a kind of thing, because my brother was in law... and I thought, I love your subject. You taught me two subjects, taught me economics and taught me history. And I said, I clarified it by saying history – I love history. I love your subject. So, well, why don't you do history? I said, well, what good would that do me in terms of a job? And he swore at me, I mean he was a bit of a swearsy teacher outside of the classroom, and he literally, obviously I won't repeat, but he swore at me and said, what does it matter what job you'll get with it, if that's what you want to do? And it was a revelation, and I was thinking, wow! And I did, I went and did history, I had the best three years of my life, absolutely fabulous. And yeah, at the end of it, it was difficult getting a job and I was unemployed for a year. But I do not regret it at all. Now. He was being very *partial*. So actually, sometimes being partial is not a bad thing. And I just think it's unrealistic.

[00:10:23] **Sarah:** I mean, you say he was being partial, because he obviously wanted you to go into higher education, but would you say he... because that impartiality was, I really liked that example of him saying, what is it that you want? Because that's very person-centred, that was giving you the opportunity to express your views and your perspective, and really reflect to him what it was that you wanted, which is crucial isn't it?

[00:10:44] **Neil:** Absolutely. Because what I think... he wasn't wanting me to go into higher education. What he wanted was what he thinks I wanted. He recognised... he was almost saying, do what *you* want to do Neil.

[00:10:57] **Lesley:** Which is the thing, that's what I pulled out of what you were just saying there as well was that when you're saying it, it actually does sound like what he was doing was listening to you.

[00:11:05] **Neil:** Absolutely, yeah.

[00:11:06] **Lesley:** And he was active and responsive. So actually, you know, although it's what happens, isn't it, you kind of think it's one thing, but then when you dig into something you think actually no, this is about... his example was, well, if you'd said actually I want to be a bricklayer, his response would have been right, well, what you want to do... because actually I've decided I don't want to be a lawyer, I actually want to follow my father or grandfather, and I want to go into the brick... building business.

[00:11:33] **Neil:** I mean if I may I've got little anecdote about a bricklayer. Can I? I was working in a school once and I was working with the young person and I knew what they were capable of academically. And they were capable of A-levels and university. But he went, it was a school a particular school where not a lot of young people went into higher education. And he said... I said, well, what are you thinking, and he said I want to be a bricklayer. And I was quite, at that time, I was very new and I was thinking, to myself, you don't want to go and be a bricklayer. I know that you're capable of... but actually, so I kind of tried to talk to him about other things related, you know things like architecture or building surveying and all that. And then, in hindsight, I'm thinking that that might have still been the best thing for him at that time. And I often think about that young person now, thinking he probably runs his own business now, he's probably a multimillionaire, but he probably started being a bricklayer. And he probably ignored my conversation and my, you know... so I think that, going back to impartiality, you can be partial. Impartial is making sure, and there's a term that we used to use in my profession, making an *informed* choice. So I now think the most important thing is it doesn't matter what people choose as long as it's informed. And my role is to make sure I'm thinking inwardly here. Does this person... are they making this choice informed of all the possible options and the consequences, etc? And if they are, it doesn't matter what I think.

[00:13:14] **Lesley:** It's funny because all of that just fits in with like the other things that we were thinking about with the terms, which is things like practitioner bias, which you've kind of just covered in that as well, and social capital, because what you're really talking about there is the expectations then about certain groups of people, aren't you.

[00:13:30] **Neil:** Absolutely. And I'm actually now horrified to think that I might have even tried to persuade them not to become a bricklayer. Well, what's wrong with being a bricklayer? That's absolutely... you know, we need bricklayers, it's absolutely fine. And I probably didn't try to persuade him not to, but you know, in my mind, this was many years ago, I probably was thinking "you could do better". That's quite arrogant on my part, as a professional practitioner, to think that people can do better than something. So I talk in the paper about a value system, about why we view certain jobs and occupations or decisions as being of a certain level. Why?

### **Professional responsibility and multi-agency working**

[00:14:04] **Sarah:** Yeah, I think it'd be really interesting to start unpicking some of that with you, because I think some of what you've said already, just talking about those key concepts, is linking to some of the stuff that Lesley and I wanted to ask you about, particularly around the values and around what you were saying before about informed choice, because that's something really important in the social work profession as well, but actually the amount of choice that people have, that social workers are working with, might be much more limited. So professionally there are different contexts and different mediating or limiting aspects of those two roles and I think it'd be good to talk about some of those today as well.

[00:14:46] **Lesley:** Yeah, because it was making me think, because I think you and I saw each other before Neil, because you were interested in the fact that I was thinking about some of my practice. Because it does, that's why I'm really enjoying this process actually, because I'm reading different things and then I'm having a little ponder thinking about my own practice examples, and because I position what you were doing within a – I know it's wider than this – but in a sort of educational framework, about what they want to do. But as a child protection social worker, which is my background, that was very far away. The aspirations, what somebody wants to do in that aspect was very far away than what I was thinking of as a practitioner, because what I was thinking about was, you know, are they safe? Have they got enough food? Are they in danger? But even within that, I do remember the education plans that were there at the time, being invited, and I just never had time. And I'm quite sad about that. I had a conversation with one young mother who actually said to me – we ended up chatting one day on the way somewhere – and she said she'd thought about going to college to learn how to be a hairdresser. And all I then did was just gave her a phone number. And then that was the end of that conversation almost, because everything else was about her children. And I felt quite sad. I don't know if I've got a question based on that, it's just a statement.

[00:16:19] **Neil:** My response to that would be, I was in, I've been in the opposite situation where I've had a young person sitting in front of me and I'm supposed to talk to them about what they want to do when they leave school, for example, and I'm thinking that you need a good meal because you look really unhealthy, or you need some other... A classic example, for me anyway, it's a classic though, was I was a duty officer once, someone came in, they were homeless. I'm not going to talk to them about, well, what do you want to do? That for me was priority. So I literally, *literally* said, "come on then" and I



walked with them to social services. I got up, and fortunately social services were only a street or two away, and I physically got up with them, and I had a manager who said that wasn't my role. But I saw my role was helping young people, that was my priority. My role was to help young people, yes within the career guidance kind of setting, but it was to help. That person didn't need career guidance at that time, they needed a roof over their head. Now, what was interesting was, he didn't want to see anybody but me after that.

[00:17:36] **Lesley:** Had you already met him or was that a drop-in?

[00:17:38] **Neil:** No that was the first time I've met him. I can picture him now.

[00:17:41] **Lesley:** Yeah. But you helped him.

[00:17:43] **Neil:** Yeah. And now unfortunately, some of the other things I couldn't help him with because that wasn't my expertise. But when it came to then discussing his life in a sense, what he was going to do with his life, he came back to me and we had a positive working relationship. But yeah, so it works both ways. I've sometimes been really frustrated because I can't physically put a roof over their head or put food in their mouth or whatever.

[00:18:11] **Lesley:** Yeah. Because one of the things as well was about how... I think maybe I'm slightly influenced by my knowledge of you as well and the conversations we've had outside of the article, but social workers, to a certain extent, there's been a de-skilling of some of the roles within that. And I wonder what you think about the way that that's happened with career guidance. Do you think there's some similarities there? That actually what's happening is we're just spreading out, that if you encounter them, it's your responsibility to do that.

[00:18:41] **Neil:** Yeah, I mean, it's a double-edged sword I think, in a sense, it's that the more people are aware of... I mean, I remember a colleague of mine saying, when we kind of changed as an organisation, we were the Careers Service, it was called the Careers Service and we became something bigger, which was the Connexions Service and it had a wider remit. And I was fully behind that because it was wider. It was bigger. But of course the downside of that is that you become less expert, potentially, in what you originally went into. So funnily enough I was just saying to Sarah earlier, there's a valid argument, and I think professionals, if they work together, can actually make the most of other people's skills and their skillset. I was worried when me and



my colleagues started going beyond the boundaries. So I would have... I mean, I have worked with some people who tried to be social workers, they were career guidance workers trying to be the social worker, and I've known social workers try to be the careers advisor. But I think if you rely on each other for the support and help, then that's fine. But I have been worried that there was a kind of a dilution, of everybody now can do all of these things. And I think there's a balance between having a broad approach and having a knowledge of lots of different things. And I definitely found when I was working that I could always tap into individuals within a partner organisation that had a similar kind of mindset to me, that they knew that they weren't expert in something so would come to me. I knew I wasn't the expert in something and I would go to them for support and help.

[00:20:31] **Sarah:** Yeah, I think that's so important, isn't it? That's something we're always teaching the students about multi-agency working and collaboration and how to work together. And obviously there are challenges with that as well, but I think what you pick up on there is that important point that different professionals do have different skills. And although that has changed to some extent, it's still true. You're trained in particular ways, you have particular knowledge and expertise, and those should complement each other when you're working together.

[00:20:57] **Neil:** Yeah. I mean, it is the skills, but I think it's the knowledge. I think we can share the skills, I have no problem with the sharing the skills, things like empathy, for example, as a skill, everybody should have empathy, I mean I wouldn't even put a limit on *any* profession. I mean, you could be a bricklayer you should have empathy, you know, I think that's a skill everybody should have. But in terms of the *knowledge*, I can't have all the knowledge in my head. So I think we need to share that knowledge.

[00:21:22] **Sarah:** I definitely need to.

[00:21:23] **Neil:** We need to be better at doing that, I think. And I think, as a practitioner, you must take responsibility for that. I don't think you can rely on the organisation, the network, government legislation or whatever. I think you, as a professional, have to say, am I doing the best for this person that I'm working with at the moment? And does that need me contacting someone else and involving somebody else, and almost, dare I say it, ignoring... not procedures, but just making sure that I'm comfortable that I'm doing the best for the young person.

[00:22:01] **Lesley:** I suppose it's about challenging when the procedure is potentially a discriminatory thing.

[00:22:06] **Neil:** Exactly, of course, yes. But I mean, like that example that I gave earlier, where I walked out of the office with that young person to social services... these days I'd probably get disciplined for actually leaving the premises with someone to take them to another organisation, I don't know! But at the time I thought that was what was needed.

[00:22:29] **Lesley:** It's hard though, because when you were talking there Neil I was thinking – I mean, this has been really interesting for me because I don't know the role of the careers guidance. I don't know that, but I know the social worker role. But there's other roles, but the people that matter, who don't know what all the ins and outs of those roles are, are actually the experts, the young people, the young person you spoke to, the people I encountered. And there isn't a nice, easy way for them to understand, "well, actually that's not my job" comes up quite often, doesn't it?

[00:23:02] **Neil:** Yeah, it's more complex than my profession in a sense now because guidance practitioners are employed by a multitude of different types of organisations. Whereas when I was working, many years ago, there was a kind of conformity to the kind of organisation we worked for. I was local government, mainly, universities had their own careers advisors, etc., but mainly local government was with the responsibility. So there's a kind of established... a bit like you have in social work. Now, guidance practitioners work across a range, that even if you work in a school, you might be working for a school that's within a particular kind of academy network, you know? So that has a different... so actually guidance practitioners now... it's really quite complex, who they might work for, and they sometimes have multiple roles, so they might be on one hand a career guidance practitioner, but also responsible for marketing.

[00:24:02] **Lesley:** Yeah. And that's the same across with social work as well.

[00:24:05] **Sarah:** Yeah because, you know, qualified social workers don't just work in statutory services. So that role can be quite broad too can't it?

[00:24:12] **Lesley:** It can be really broad. I've literally just come from sorting out the social science research placement module, where we've just tried to list the different type of organisations – not the specific ones, but the *type*. So

we were sitting there thinking, well, okay, yeah, there is the local government aspects, the local authority, but then there's all different types of charity organisations, social enterprises, private sector, community associations, cooperatives. And we were sitting there thinking, if we're sitting here struggling to write that list, how do the people who actually have to then encounter all these professionals, how on earth do they know? "Well,, I thought I was coming to you!" So that young person, to me, I'm thinking they just needed help at that moment. You were there and they have a bond and they feel connected to you. There's too much around "ah no, we can't give you that, so you have to go somewhere else for that." Because this is where it's all the same, isn't it?

[00:25:13] **Sarah:** I think that's such a challenge, not only just for the confusion that must arise, but also in terms of, you know, that young people in your example, or anyone in a difficult situation, having to repeat their circumstances over and over again, to different professionals to access different services.

[00:25:31] **Neil:** And young people and adults, presumably as well, they don't always know what are... they just see an adult that's a professional and they're there to help you. And they don't actually know what your constraints are or who you work for. And in a sense does it matter? From their point of view it doesn't matter, you're just there to try to help them. If they want the help of course.

[00:25:52] **Lesley:** So we just want to change the world, basically!

[00:25:54] **Sarah:** Yeah change the whole system, burn it down, start again.

[00:25:58] **Neil:** Yeah but I'm a firm believer that you can find a way to find individuals that will. That's why I was saying about, in a way it's an individual's... it's your responsibility as a professional to try to build your own network, in a sense, I think. I think anyway, because you can't assume it'll be made for you, the network.

### **Professional values and external pressures**

[00:26:16] **Sarah:** Yeah, no, I, I think that's a good point Neil. I think that leads me onto one of the things I wanted to ask you about actually, bringing it back to your paper specifically, because what I found really interesting is that in the paper was your exploration of the antagonism between professional values.

And I think there's a lot of overlap between the values of career guidance practitioners and of social workers. There is some overlap in those, and then the direction that both professions are being pushed in, the squeezing of the role, those kinds of pressures, organisational and wider structural pressures on the professions. And you talked about that antagonism between professional values and those kinds of pressures, and I just wondered if you think that can be resisted in some way within the role? That's a big question isn't it! Come on Neil! Answer it, save the world!

[00:27:08] **Neil:** Yeah. I mean, I can speak sort of anecdotally in person in how I've personally resisted it, and I mean I... **you can do it in little ways and sometimes the little ways can be quite powerful**, especially if, ultimately if I've got someone in front of me, I'm there to help them. That's all that really matters. And I used to – I think it's partly in some quarters it's similar now – but I used to get young people sent to me because they would lose their benefits if they weren't seen by careers advisors.

[00:27:41] **Lesley:** Oh, so then that's not voluntary.

[00:27:42] **Neil:** So it's not voluntary. So they came resistant, and they knew this, and so what I tried to do was distance myself from the policy, in a sense. So I didn't actually agree with that policy, I didn't agree that you should have your benefits withdrawn simply because you hadn't seen your careers advisor and they hadn't referred you for a job interview. And I just didn't like that, but I had to keep to the rules.

[00:28:08] **Sarah:** So when you say you resisted it, how did you manage that then?

[00:28:10] **Neil:** So I would say to the young person, I'd be *congruent* in a sense, a term that we use in terms of **I had to be true to myself**. So I couldn't pretend. So I would say, "do you realise that actually, if you don't come to your next appointment with me, it's part of my role, I have to inform somebody at the benefits office that you haven't come today. I don't want to do that." So I would share that with them. And sometimes that just creates a sense of trust and a bond. And then if they don't turn up then at least I've been absolutely honest with them. And sometimes I used to say, "I don't agree with that policy, but I'm afraid that's the policy I have to work with ". So that was my little... and actually you'd get somewhere... Or my boss once said, I won't say who it was,

many, many, many years ago, "whatever government throw at us, we'll try to do it the way that we feel benefits the people that we work for".

[00:29:06] **Sarah:** Yeah, I think you've touched on two really, really nice and really important points there. So that second one really is that policies don't implement themselves, people implement them. So, I think, what your boss said kind of resonates in terms of that, that the first point, I think in social work, in the literature, one of the things that comes up again and again, when you look at research that's actually engaged with people who use social work services, experts by experience, is that they really value honesty from the professional, and not being told that they can do something that actually they can't, because there are restrictions because of their role and the policies that they have to work within. So actually you saying that was acknowledging the fact that you didn't agree with it, but you were powerless in that instance, but actually just being honest about, "well, this is what it looks like, I don't like it, but this is how it works", probably does make a difference even though it's such a small thing, just actually acknowledging that with someone can be quite powerful can't it?

[00:30:06] **Neil:** It is, because if I was just to say, "well if you don't come to your next appointment, you'll have your benefits stopped", what's that going to do? That's just going to put up a barrier... They'll see that as me, that's me preventing them getting their benefits.

[00:30:18] **Lesley:** And then if you don't say that, and then you *do* that, you've completely lost...

[00:30:23] **Sarah:** It's dishonest really to not be up-front...

[00:30:27] **Lesley:** I think that's an important part of all practice because, yeah the research I've done as well, Sarah, has always highlighted that element of people felt that it is about feeling that they can trust that individual. That's a real challenge when you're actually going in there with a law behind you that can actually take somebody's rights away from them. That's really challenging, but it's how you use it. And I think you touch on that element, because one of my questions was about, you talked about voluntary participation in your article, but it's interesting now that actually you're saying that some of it was *not* because those young people were not volunteering to come and see you. So there is that element with any practitioner I think that they will encounter both voluntary and... what's the correct term?

[00:31:19] **Sarah:** Someone who isn't there voluntarily.

[00:31:21] **Neil:** But I can see from, you know, I mean obviously I've not been a social worker, but I can imagine how that is relevant. It must be really difficult knowing what the law is. I mean, the example that always goes through my head, if you're trying to challenge parents about whether they can retain their children, for example, that must be so difficult, and it's understandable they would think of *you* as being the person that's going to take their children away.

[00:31:51] **Lesley:** Yeah, it is a really challenging thing to think about because when I left practice to come to work at the university, I've often considered was the way that I spoke to them, was that actually manipulative, you know? I think it's easier out of practice to reflect on it, than when you're in the midst of things, and you're just trying to get through your caseloads and that's the same across any areas of practice now, I mean the amount of work that people are covering is huge isn't it? And it's really hard to be constantly aware of what you're saying, to the absolute minute detail, just in case you're saying something that actually is a little bit manipulative. But I think that's the bit where I was thinking, what do you think that social workers could take from career guidance practitioners? Do you think there's a particular way of working with young people that maybe they have that social workers, or maybe youth offending teams, could take on board and things like that?

[00:32:53] **Neil:** I would put it the other way around, and I would say we all can learn from each other. I've worked with social workers over the years as partner-colleagues, and youth workers and teachers and all sorts of... and personally I'm not one of these that thinks "all those professionals are like this". So what I would say is **the best practice is the ones that have the genuine interests of the people that they're trying to support and help at heart**. And if you can try to do it in a way that kind of... I used to try to distance myself from things I didn't like. And you might think, well, I don't want to, there might be...

[00:33:32] **Lesley:** But you weren't dishonest about it were you?

[00:33:34] **Neil:** No, I just think it's being honest...

[00:33:35] **Lesley:** Distanced but acknowledging what it felt like to you.

[00:33:38] **Neil:** Being open and honest. I mean, I know it's a cliché, but people respect honesty, even if they don't agree with you, at least they respect your honesty. But I'm not going to say what I think... Because I learnt hugely, as a career guidance person, I've learnt hugely from other professionals.

[00:33:59] **Lesley:** I think that's kind of it, isn't it, that if actually some of the challenges around things like partnership working and practice, if actually we recognise there's something we can learn from each other, rather than "this is my job, that's your job". I'm not saying that is what happens all the time, but there have been, when you're trying to get a group of professionals around to understand a person in front of them or a child or whatever's going on, they're all from completely different backgrounds, completely different education, academic learning, different research, different theories behind it. And they're all looking at this same situation ever so slightly differently. So actually, what I think you're saying is, if actually we all take the positive elements from each other's practice and listen to what each other is thinking, then we can put something together...

[00:34:48] **Neil:** I think open-minded and open to other people's ideas and good practice, and not sort of thinking that you know it all, that's probably the worst type of practice is to think you do know it all. The moment you think, you know it all, you're on the downward slope. I mean, I've got a lot of experience, but I still think I can do things better, I can still learn from people, always. You must always think you can learn from other people.

[00:35:15] **Sarah:** Definitely. I think that's what's interesting about even this process of recording the podcast, you know, actually taking a paper that's ostensibly not about social work and realising there's so much to take from it and learn that *is* relevant for social work practice.

[00:35:30] **Neil:** One thought was just going through my head then about the idea of empathy. I mean, if I was to write another paper, that would be something I'd be quite interested in writing about...

[00:35:39] **Lesley:** Has this process just inspired you to write your next paper Neil?

[00:35:43] **Neil:** If you can genuinely show empathy, then that that's a real step forward I think. There's some misconceptions about what empathy is, but...



[00:35:52] **Sarah:** That would be great.

### **Practitioner bias and reflection**

[00:35:53] **Sarah:** I'm going to ask you actually about another concept now, which we have touched on already, but I was really interested by your discussion of practitioner bias, and you went into some detail about that, including commenting around pressures that people experience in very demanding, very busy roles and how that can contribute to practitioner bias. And I really just wanted you to share some of that discussion for the podcast. I think that'd be really interesting.

[00:36:24] **Neil:** Yeah. I mean, biases from a professional level, it partly depends who you work for, you know, there can be bias there, can't there? I mean, I work for a university here at Sunderland, and I've been at open days, for example, and part of the open day is to kind of share, you know, tell everyone how wonderful the program is, the course is, that you represent. And it would be very easy to like, "well, come on, this course because it's the best course since sliced bread". But I have to be genuine, you know, I can't do that, that's bias.

[00:37:00] **Sarah:** You don't think our course is the best thing since sliced bread?

[00:37:03] **Lesley:** Neil and I have had disagreements on this point haven't we?

[00:37:06] **Sarah:** This is very upsetting to hear!

[00:37:07] **Neil:** But it's interesting because, in a way it's almost my bedrock. You know, if someone was to come on an open day... well, actually, this has happened. A phone call, someone who wanted to do a course that no longer existed. The temptation for some people is to say, "well, have you thought of this course?" Now this particular example, I knew that this particular course they wanted to do was still available, but just not here. And there's a moral dilemma. Do I try to tell them about other wonderful courses that there are available? Or a course that's not here that I happen to know about. And that's a moral dilemma. I know what I did. You probably guessed what I did.

[00:37:52] **Lesley:** Oh yeah.

[00:37:57] **Neil:** But the point about bias is that you can be biased without deliberately being biased, I think.

[00:38:05] **Sarah:** So it can be kind of unconscious bias.

[00:38:07] **Neil:** Subconscious or unconscious bias. I'm biased. We are all biased. And how well do I hide it? You know? And I might think I'm not biased, but I will be. My son does not support his local football team because he knows who I support. And when he was a little boy, I deliberately tried not to get him to support my team, because I wanted to support him to support his local team, but there's an unconscious bias there that I probably talked about my team more than I did the team that...

[00:38:45] **Sarah:** So even when you're aware of a bias and trying to counter it, you're saying it can still feed through in our actions, the way we talk to people.

[00:38:52] **Neil:** Yeah, absolutely. I mean, I come from a, you mentioned very early about a kind of social capital and a cultural capital, and I can't take away my capital that I have, my social capital, my cultural capital, I can't take away my upbringing, my background, I can't take that away. I might try to not make it influence what I do, when I'm working, but I can't help that.

[00:39:15] **Sarah:** So how can practitioners be more aware of their biases and try and counter them? Because, as you rightfully said in your paper, when we're so busy, when we're tired and we're rushing and we're trying to get everything done, we have less time to talk, we've less time to reflect, it's difficult.

[00:39:33] **Neil:** I thought Lesley made a really interesting comment a few minutes ago when you said that actually, since you've stopped being a practitioner and come to work here, you now reflect more on what you're doing. And I've certainly done that. And I probably, when I look back now thinking "I wouldn't have done that now". So there's no kind of magic formula to this, but I think, I would like to think, that organisations somehow build in time to reflect. We actually, I remember having a conversation in my previous employer, we actually deliberately tried to build in reflection time. You know, so that at the end of a team meeting, "okay, who wants to bring to the table cases that they've been dealing with recently and reflect on that?" But, as you say Sarah, that is so hard to do when the next case needs looking at.

[00:40:23] **Lesley:** I mean, social workers do have supervision, and within that they obviously do have, with their managers, they have time to reflect, but it's not the same. Because I know from my experience that that was very much case- driven, and what needs to be done. And there was opportunities, but it's about time. And having the time and the space to do what is thinking and reflecting on something. It's like when we're trying to write things, I can't, in the midst of a busy time at work, I can't write. I need to get away, almost going to the forest, kind of thing, you know, I want to walk barefoot through the forest. It's almost like that, you need to get out of that space because actually you need to be able to completely distance yourself from you *in* it, and look at you *doing* it and think about how...

[00:41:18] **Neil:** You almost need like a kind of a parachute looking down on yourself and looking at your colleagues in a completely detached way...

[00:41:25] **Lesley:** You need to get away don't you?

[00:41:26] **Neil:** And that often isn't the time to do that. I mean, the reason why I've only just finished my paper now is because I've had more time over the summer to finish it off.

[00:41:36] **Sarah:** I suppose there are techniques that can help you to do that. And there are reflective tools and things, but yeah, it can be difficult in the midst of everything to actually find that space and that time. And if you're not aware of your biases, the only way that you're going to uncover them and try to address them is through taking that time and those conversations and that reflection.

[00:41:58] **Neil:** But yeah, I've definitely got more philosophical as I've got older and about, you know, I no longer think anything I say is right. Or wrong! I just think it is, it just is. It's just what it is.

Now my favourite example is how light travels, and if any scientists are listening I've probably got this wrong, but does light travel in waves or particles? And there was huge debate, massive debate at the turn of the last century, eminent scientists arguing, "oh, it's waves", "oh it's particles". And actually the common consensus I think now, might be wrong, is it's both. It's both. And I sometimes think, well, there is no right or wrong, it's just that's how it is, or it may be right or wrong, but it's your moral judgment...

[00:42:51] **Lesley:** Yeah, which almost takes us back to where you started, which was that idea about impartiality and trying not to just take sides or being so influenced by your own personal experience or values, but actually just trying to see things for what they are and look at it in that way, and look at that person in front of you and think, "this is what I need to do". "That's how I need to focus", maybe.

[00:43:16] **Neil:** Well I put paradox in the title because I think it *is* a paradox. Someone said it's like the impossible dream. I'm trying to achieve the impossible dream.

[00:43:29] **Sarah:** Yeah. But we need to just keep trying, otherwise you never make any progress.

I think that's a really good point to start wrapping up the conversation, because we've been talking for quite a while now and it's been really enjoyable. Can I ask you Neil, what are you going to do now? What's next for you? The paper about empathy is obviously on its way...

[00:43:50] **Neil:** I mean, obviously Lesley knows me very well and she's probably thinking, "well, why has it taken you so long to write this?" And as I was writing and finishing it off I was thinking there's more left in the tank to write. And empathy is something that really fascinates me. So maybe it's something about... because I think sometimes people get confused about what empathy actually is. But also a thing about empathy, for me, is I don't think empathy is something that should stay within the caring profession. I think it should be out there. So if I was to write something I would be asking what can other professions learn from the caring professions in terms of empathy? Maybe, I don't know.

[00:44:36] **Sarah:** That sounds like something I would love to read.

[00:44:39] **Lesley:** Yeah.

### **Take home messages**

[00:44:39] **Sarah:** So, Neil, what, in your opinion, are the key messages that social workers can take home from this paper that you've written and from your kind of wider research?

[00:44:50] **Neil:** Well certainly... working together. I know it's a cliché, but in a sense, go with your instinct. There's a kind of an instinct, I don't know whether that's an instinct that's developed over time, because instinct suggests it's biological, I'm not suggesting that, but kind of go with what you think is right. But check it out, because it might not be. But I would definitely think – in terms of what would social workers take – work with others, don't think that you know it all, and I think looking at yourself before you look at the person opposite you. So when I'm trying to help people, I think if I know myself, if I can sort of think how I think, and what influences what I think, before I start thinking about how other people... But I think it's really made me think about who I am and what's influenced me. The writing is really there... and I think, right, so other people think like that, for all sorts of reasons, they might think differently, they might think similar to me. And I think social workers... my experience of working with social workers has always been great because they are incredibly caring individuals, but I like to think of myself as a caring individual, but I've sometimes thought I've known best and I haven't, I haven't known what's best at a moment in time.

[00:46:30] **Lesley:** You need to challenge yourself.

[00:46:32] **Neil:** **Challenge yourself before you challenge other people.**

[00:46:36] **Sarah:** I think that's great advice.

[00:46:38] **Lesley:** I think that is, because I think that's a good point to take forward, as a reflection and development for people who, if – hopefully we have listeners, but if we have, then you know – yeah, I think that's a really good point to take forward, for practitioners to think about, is to actually challenge yourself first, before looking to challenge others

[00:47:02] **Neil:** I mean, ABBA have just done a reunion, *Knowing Me, Knowing You*.

[00:47:06] **Lesley:** I'm not sure I like that point to finish on!

[00:47:07] **Sarah:** You love to bring in a song, don't you Neil. But in all seriousness I really do agree with that, and I think that's a very humbling thought to finish on as well, and does link back to this idea of empathy being so crucial too.

Okay, so hopefully you've all enjoyed our lovely chat with Neil today. Um, just a reminder that if you want to read Neil's paper, you can find a link to it in the show notes, along with a summary of the episode and some definitions of the key concepts that we've covered and talked about today. I'm very much looking forward to seeing you next time when we'll be talking to Dr Rick Bowler about his work on race.

Bye for now. Bye Neil.

[00:47:48] **Neil:** Bye

[00:47:49] **Sarah:** Bye Lesley

[00:47:50] **Lesley:** Goodbye, Sarah. Goodbye Neil.

[00:47:54] **Sarah:** Goodbye Neil, goodbye Lesley.

...

[00:47:55] **Sarah:** You have been listening to the Portal Podcast, linking research and practice for social work with me, Dr Sarah Lonbay.

[00:48:02] **Lesley:** And Dr Lesley Deacon. And this was funded by the University of Sunderland, edited by Paperghosts, and our theme music is called, *Together We're Stronger* by All Music Seven.

[00:48:13] **Sarah:** And don't forget that you can find a full transcript of today's podcast and links and extra information in our show notes. So anything you want to follow up from what you've heard today, check out there and you should find some useful extra resources.

See you all next time.

[00:48:27] **Lesley:** Bye.