**Flora**

**If we could start then, could I just ask how long you've been teaching and whether or not you've taught the key stage 1 or the key stage 2 curriculum in preparation for those tests?**

I've been teaching for, this is my 10th year of teaching and I have taught for 7 years in key stage 2 teaching the Year 5 and 6, because we're a small school so it's mixed-age groups and I, therefore, was teaching the Year 6 in preparation for their SATS tests so [0:51] grammar paper and then I taught in key stage 1 for 2 years and now I'm back teaching in the Year 6 again. So I have taught both ends of the scale.

**Okay. Great. So quite a bit of experience with those tests then and the curriculum content.**

Yes fairly, yes.

**And since they've come into place, well 2013 they first came in, then a new version in 2016. Could you just talk a little bit about your, I suppose, your general feelings about those tests and the way that?**

Well when they first came in I think there was a lot of new terminology that even staff were not familiar with so I would call myself somebody that is fairly experienced of teaching writing and someone who is very interested in writing and literacy and literature and never, I write just for my own pleasure but I've never ever had to access some of the terminology or never was taught it when I was at school so I think for myself and particularly for a lot of my colleagues, and we are a small school so I'd say 100% of my colleagues, a lot of the terminology that was, we were being asked to teach was actually unfamiliar to us. I remember complete feelings of hopelessness back then, a real sense that I wasn’t good enough. I felt pretty stupid to be honest you know, that I didn’t even know the stuff I was meant to be teaching to Year 6. The first kind of journey was making sure that even the staff knew what they were doing and they might be familiar with the techniques but the actual terminology of what they had to teach was unfamiliar, yes.

**Yes sure. And how do you feel about the amount of terminology that children are tested on then because you talked a little bit about, I suppose, staff knowledge and perhaps some anxieties about that terminology as well?**

Well, I personally don’t believe that children should be kind of sheltered from you know, using the correct terminology for things. I don't think it’s a case of, [2:53] we can teach young children to speak a foreign language for example but it's about what is the purpose of knowing the terminology and is it actually a barrier to them, you know, what are you actually trying to achieve by having this grammar knowledge? And for me as somebody who used to actually spend most of my English time teaching children to write I found it was absolutely awful having to set aside time to teach, kind of, grammar skills because I knew that they were going to be asked in the paper rather than teaching them imbedded skills into their writing really. And I think it bought about a lot of false kind of, forced writing and also a lot of curriculum time taken up by [3:47].

**I see. So by forced writing do you mean kind of like artificial writing where like [3:54]?**

Yes. So there's the sort of, and also I'm involved in moderating writing, we do moderating, cross moderation with the local schools and also I've done some with the county and we find that you're looking at children writing sentences which are ugly, sort of forced sentences, they're trying to practice something that they have been taught as being a necessary skill like fronted adverbials with you know, that you must put a comma after it and things like this, sort of, things that actually, in a good piece of writing needs to be something that is naturally used when appropriate and not to sort of fulfill a tick list of what you're doing.

**Of course, and that resonates so much with what a lot of the other teachers that I've spoken to have said so it's interesting to hear that you're saying similar things. So a lot of other criticisms, apart from the kind of artificial writing pedagogies, that the tests and the curriculum arguably create, a lot of the other criticisms have been around the focus on very decontextualised grammar in those assessments.**

Yes. Well, the entire test is totally decontextualised, absolutely. And there are points in which that you could almost, I think there's some synonym and [5:15] questions which actually could be argued as being sometimes subjective as to what has been allowable, there's been ridiculous cases where children have written also punctuation marks which haven’t quite been in the right size or the right shape and things which just kind of take you away from the whole purpose of what, I suppose, the test was designed to improve these particular skills but then when they're tested, sometimes children just don't observe things when it's in a [5:45] test and in an isolated sentence there. For example putting capital letters into a particular phrase or, you know, when they're writing they might use them fine but when they're in a test like that you might just overlook it because it's not presented in a paragraph, it's not presented in a book or a piece of writing and so I feel that the test is completely [6:12] wrong for the purpose. if the intention is to improve the grammatical use of our pupils then I think it’s the wrong test. And then teachers teach to pass the test and then [6:26].

**Definitely. And again that was going to be what I was going to ask next about how much power as such, do you think the tests have in determining I suppose, how you teach grammar and how much time you spend preparing students for the test and indeed as you say, teaching to the test.**

I think that it is totally teacher dependent and possibly managed independent in the school because I kind of, when it first came in I took a measure of it and I actually decided to not teach the aspects that I didn't think were going to be useful for children's creative writing and as a result actually our grammar scores were not particularly as glorious as the writing or maths or reading with my class and I kind of knew that that was because I was not giving them enough time and when we had another teacher in that class she spent a lot of time teaching grammar and the results were fantastic but then other results in other areas have suffered. You do you have to give over a lot of time to this paper because there's a lot of content, it's not just, it's huge amounts of content and it's something that you have to be repeated because it's new terminology for the majority of it and the children have to repeat and repeat it and repeat it until it's imbedded so I think far far too much time is spent teaching discrete grammar lessons which could be better and used for other things.

**Yes of course.**

But teachers are stretched with everything so you make choices, I think.

**Absolutely. And you've mentioned a couple of times that the tests arguably, because people spend so much time preparing for them that they've had quite a negative impact on the curriculum in the sense that they've narrowed the curriculum.**

Yes definitely. [8:39]

**Would that be fair to say?**

[8:40] yes.

**Okay. And does your, you've talked a little bit about your own pedagogical principles as such for teaching grammar. Does your school have a policy for the teaching of grammar? So you mentioned before the word 'discrete' in a sense of discrete grammar lessons.**

No, it doesn’t have. We do actually teach discrete phonics and spelling because it's done as a whole school from EYFS up to Year 6 for kind of rolling strategy to try and keep the spelling stronger within school because early phonics is really important and we don't want to let that go as it goes on, but that is taught short burst of time every day throughout their school but other than that we don't have any guidance or policy on what we teach in our English lessons. So if a teacher decided say, one teacher will spend more time teaching grammar than another depending on how much they feel the burden and pressure on passing the grammar test [9:51].

**Of course. And I suppose for some teachers it must be quite difficult that, because if you're in a position where you're under pressure to produce results etc but even though you might not believe in what those tests are assessing, what do you do in that instance? Do you teach to the test and kind of please management or do you resist and say, 'no I'm going to do something different.'**

I think it's really hard to speak to any other teachers but I would, in my experience, that if you are not a, if you're a newer teacher maybe or if you're not a confident teacher you will teach to the test because that's what you're being judged on. You have to be quite sure and experienced and fully understand the wider and deeper curriculum to really understand that what you can teach and what's most effective so actually I think it's being detrimental because most new teachers will want to get results and see teaching to the test as the sort of easiest way or the sort of safest way to do that rather than [11:03] that it's in the child to be actually competent for themselves in what they're doing that they can then cross apply their skills is actually much more important. That takes a lot of confidence as a teacher and experience, I think.

**Yes definitely. And also, you know, trust. A belief that management aren't going to pick you up on certain things and you know, you have to work in a system where you have that genuine sense of autonomy, don't you?**

It's also more measurable, the grammar test is measurable because so it's easier to [11:36] in a way so you can, if you've got an English lesson and you've got a choice of doing a creative writing session or teaching some grammar, well you know that there's sort of some rights and wrongs according to the grammar test, I'm not suggesting that there aren't rights and wrongs in English grammar when there's some many grey areas so I think that if you're not so confident you think, well I know I can teach this because I know there's a rule and children learn the rule and then they'll know the rule and then they'll be tested on that rule. And so it's also for some teachers, it feels a little safer and they'll spend more time teaching it and its not necessarily what's needed I don't think.

**That makes a lot of sense.**

And the children don't like it, it stifles their creativity.

**Sure, I can imagine. And this is the last question as such and it picks up again on something that you just mentioned which is, that the way that language is presented in those tests is a very right and wrong, kind of, very polarized distinction and you mentioned there that language isn't like that, it's full of grey areas etc. Just, maybe, at the risk of asking you to repeat it a little bit here, but what’s your perception of that way of framing language and those very binary right, wrong and correct, incorrect etc, ways?**

I think if you read children good literature and in fact the majority of literature, it has to be [13:06] children will experience and see that rules are broken and it's not that I don't think that grammar and learning the grammar, and even having a test is not, I think it can be important and I just don't think it’s the way it's currently used. I think learning a rule and then understanding how breaking it can be effective, you know, could be quite powerful when you're a writer but learning a rule and thinking, this is the only way I can write because you're at that stage in your development, it takes a really advanced writer in primary school to feel that they can break rules and yet good writers do that all the time so telling them there is only one way to do something then most children won't get past that actually, so I would, I think you've got to teach children structures and punctuation and grammar but confining it and making it something that they're going to be tested on because there's only one right way of doing something, I think is really dangerous.

**Absolutely. I couldn't agree more. And that’s a really [14:17].**

Did I answer your question? Sorry, I forgot what the exact question was [14:20]

**That was exactly, yes, I don't want to say right because I'm meant to be objective in these things but I do have a view about the tests that very much resonates with what you've said. So I think if that's okay we'll leave it there but was there anything that you wanted to talk about or clarify or revisit that you haven't had the chance to do so at all?**

Well just to like, I suppose it's reiterating the point, is that I don't think, just because a test is bad that you know, don't believe in the teaching of grammar and I can understand why it has [15:03] why it's been introduced as a separate test. You know, we've always taught grammar alongside writing anyway so I think it has, it's very interesting when you're learning a foreign language, for example, to be able to make some comparisons and understand how language is put together so I can recognise the benefits of it so I just didn't want it to, I'm not a grammar basher, you know.

**Yes, sure, no me neither.**

I just think that introducing a test has been detrimental to creative writing and I think that for people to write they have to feel that they're in charge of what they're creating really.

**Absolutely. That makes a lot of sense. Okay, well thank you so much and thanks so much again for rearranging and sorry I had to change it. I'll let you get back to your Tuesday evening but thanks so much for your views. Just a reminder that this will all be anonymised and I 'm very happy to keep you up to date with the publications that will come out of this research.**

Yes, that would be interesting.

**It will take a while because academic publishing takes so long.**