**Keisha**

**Could we just start then briefly with you just outlining a little bit about your current role and how long you’ve been teaching and what you’re teaching and your involvement with schools at the moment then?**

Yes, I think it’s probably really useful actually because I’m conscious I come with my own bias about it to be perfectly honest.

**That’s okay.**

Because I teach literacy rather than English, I would describe it but it’s called English now on the curriculum. For certainly at the moment 19+ but historically from excluded year 11s 15+. And my role in the school it’s, and a bit about the school which I think is important because it’s quite a small school. So it’s an infants and junior all in one. It’s only just become single form entry all the way through previously had shared year groups because it’s quite a small semi rural location. And it’s a growing school as well as a result. And I am at the moment the Chair of the Performance and Standards Committee, so we talk about grammar quite a bit. And I’m also the governor in charge of special educational needs and disabilities. That’s put me into context.

**Okay great thank you. Have you had any experience in teaching either the content of those grammar tests at primary school at all?**

Yes, for a couple of years. And teaching the content of the grammar tests with parents.

**Okay I see.**

So that’s where a lot of my sort of background knowledge of exactly what’s in the test. I’ve done a lot. We’re losing funding for it now as everything’s getting more restricted. But historically we’ve done lots of family learning-based stuff. So I haven’t in my own school but in other schools doing, supporting parents with those sorts of understanding. Because obviously it’s so vastly different to anything parents will have experienced in their own school lives.

**Sure. So could you perhaps talk a little bit more about your experience of doing that and maybe thinking about parents’ perceptions of the tests and the content as well?**

We kind of use it in a bit of a trick way, it’s a bit of a double edge sword. Because the pull and the interest is obviously, I want to support my child. In lots of ways that’s about us being able to say we’ll support you with your own literacy development, in numeracy as well. I teach in Sale, outside of Birmingham which is sort of, I think as a metropolitan borough has the greatest divide in the country between affluence in terms of north of the borough in terms of deprivation. So we’ve done a lot of work there. But very popular in the south of borough with very sort of busy working parents too. And I think there’s a lot of confusion for parents. There’s lots of language that they won’t have encountered. Some stuff that we might think is quite simple or simplistic in terms of grammar that we’d expect people to encounter let alone a foreign language maybe.

**Sure.**

Massive anxiety and fear around it. I always say to people well why would you know if you’ve never learnt it or you’ve never experienced it.

**Of course, yeah. So that anxiety comes from their own, their feelings that they perhaps don’t know as much as they perhaps ought to do or?**

Yeah. And so then children coming out of school saying help me with this homework or that homework and the parent doesn’t know what it means or understand it.

**That’s really interesting so the tests then have not just a knock-on effect on perhaps children’s confidence but also parents’ confidence.**

Parents confidence yeah.

**You mentioned language is that. Do you mean the language in terms of grammatical language like terminology?**

Grammatical language yeah definitely.

**So it’s the terminology that seems to be.**

The terminology yeah. I mean if you’re my age then you probably, I’m not saying your parents are probably a bit old as a parent. But sort of pre-national literacy, national curriculum stuff then you wouldn’t necessarily come across what’s noun and what’s a verb and all of that stuff. So the seemingly complex grammatical terminology can be really troubling to parents. And obviously that’s sort of taught in a very different way as well isn’t it. There’s something there as well that causes some anxiety.

**That was really my next question so the way that the tests are constructed is they tend; well they don’t just tend they just do. They test very decontextualised grammar knowledge, a lot of sort of labelling and identifying etc. Has that ever been an issue either in your work or in the way that you’ve seen parents or indeed students react to those tests?**

Yes. And I was trying to think about it in terms of sort of what we see and what we hear and we’re sort of headline news when we’re looking at it from a governing perspective. And I think one of the things that we particularly see is, and again it’s only small scale, it’s a small school. Year 2 children doing their SATs tests, then who may have hit age related expectations, because they’ve had a lot of focus, they might have had intervention. We have, in my opinion, an excellent year 2 teacher who happens to be our literacy lead as well, end of the Summer holidays, coming into year 3, and they’re not there. They’re not at that expected age related, you know these are children as well, they’re not going to necessarily just. We know that it’s not a straight line but obviously it’s treated like a straight line isn’t it. And talking to the year 3 teacher, she has a lot of concerns, worries there because she’s saying, I can’t even do what I’m meant to be doing, what I’m meant to be teaching with my curriculum because I need to back up a bit really. So there’s some anxiety there for the staff, I think.

**What else do you think might be making staff anxious about this if they are feeling anxious about it?**

Well I think some of them don’t feel that confident themselves with some of it.

**So similar to the parents.**

Similar to the parents yeah. And I think that detextualised thing I mean I’ve had it as a parent from a parent to a parent knowing what I’m doing just being stopped on the playground and I get all sorts of funny questions and some will just shout at me, what’s a noun! And there’s some anxiety there. One teacher runs away when she sees me which I think’s an extreme reaction but she says she thinks I’m going to correct her spelling. But I think just shows that there is a lot of anxiety there and they’re not necessarily specialists, especially not as something as far as grammar. They’ve kind of got to be a Jack of all trades but that doesn’t mean that there’s expertise and I think that causes some anxiety as well.

**Yeah of course. And the demand on teachers. The amount of grammatical content that they’ve got to get through. I don’t think there’s anything wrong with students learning about language at all I’m all for that.**

Absolutely.

**What are your perceptions on the type of knowledge about language that they’re assessed on? Do you think it’s appropriate or would you like to see something different perhaps on those tests, if there are indeed tests?**

Yeah, I mean personally I would. Well I’d scrap tests altogether but if there is tests and that is how it is. I would personally I think very prescriptive stuff, doesn’t aid anyone. What they’re describing there in terms of year 2, year 3, I don’t think that’s just they’ve gone on holiday and they’ve forgotten stuff. I think it’s out of context. I know it’s not a grammar example but we’ve just scrapped spelling tests as a school because the children aren’t. It’s not benefitting them. You look at the research I mean does it really help. They’d memorise that spelling to pass a test and then probably forget it unless they’re using it in a writing experience.

**And you can apply that idea to the grammar test can’t you.**

Absolutely.

**A lot of teachers that I’ve spoken to. A lot of secondary school teachers and maybe you’ll have some ideas on this as well, is that what’s happening at key stage 2 is that children are getting a very good knowledge of very decontextualised grammar but very little experience of actually applying that knowledge into writing or critical reading or things.**

Yes. And that’s actually our 2nd headline news sort of story, when I was thinking about us as a governing committee looking at, that is actually it. So we’ll be saying, well hang on a minute, this is what’s happened here according to the data but what’s happened here. And the headteacher’s saying, oh well they know it but they can’t use it in their writing, they’re not demonstrating it in their writing. Well how useful is it then.

**Yeah well completely useless yeah.**

Yeah. And again, this is very definitely my own bias, well it’s not bias I suppose but my own experience in my own professional kind of standpoint, it’s very much. I mean my focus, you probably see it all over my Twitter, my blog is very much about embracing everyday literacy practice because at the end of the day that’s what we’re using it for. So I’ve got a real issue with, in FE or in adult education with folk coming along here or there now too, and then if that’s not used in any kind of context then what value is it whatsoever.

**Absolutely.**

That said as a result we had sort of writing as non-grammar but writing itself as one of our priorities on our learning improvement plan last year, which led to some really creative fantastic stuff. And in our meeting this morning we celebrated some of the year 2 children which I think is ace because you know that’s SATs year as well. Being, entering poetry competition and all of the children have been published in a book as a result.

**Great.**

And absolutely the reaction from some of the children, they’re so proud of themselves, they’re so happy, they’ve done some really fabulous work and now they’ve got it in print and that can be shared.

**Brilliant.**

That’s a real-life thing. And I found working with adults particularly is so empowering. It’s about confidence. It’s about real life so I’m hoping we can kind of keep that attitude up. And if I’m honest I think that’s really good for teachers as well.

**Well definitely yeah because who wants to spend their lives just teaching to a test.**

Yes, and it’s so prevalent now isn’t it.

**I’ve spoken to a lot of teachers about this. Generally, the pattern is overwhelmingly negative about the tests.**

Yes, I should imagine.

**And a lot of teachers seem just incredibly disheartened and the tests and indeed curriculum reform seems to be having a really quite serious impact on their perceptions of themselves as teachers in terms of what.**

Yes.

**And so a lot of teachers talk about doing pedagogies that they just really don’t believe in. Is that something that you would say has resonated with either you or your colleagues. Have you heard similar stories at all?**

Yeah definitely. Yeah, I think that’s true and I think if you then add into that that feeling if you’re then suddenly. We’ve been looking this morning at some of the issues around closing the gap in disadvantaged groups, working with children with SEND, proportionally we don’t have a high proportion at the school of children with special educational needs and disabilities, but some of those that we do there’s quite big affect stuff. So add that into the mix, we’ve got some stress our teachers I’ll be perfectly honest at school and it’s a lovely, tiny little pretty sort of nice reasonably affluent area, middle of quite a leafy place, you’d expect them to be the happiest, and they’re not, they’re struggling and they’re stressed out and they’re overloaded. And I think that teaching to the test. Yeah I know your focus is particular with the SATs but I think in-between those years 3, 4, 5, 6, because of the way the curriculum and the assessment as well, they’re sort of, they’re grouped 3, 4, 5, 6, so I think they’re really under assessing the children as well, and that’s I think. And it came up, not higher up the school actually the junior school, but it did come up at our last staff inspection, reception, quite early years, but that’s a lack of teacher confidence. So we had. I know it’s not SATs directly related, but with that feedback from the Ofsted inspector was very much, well they’re coming out of their pre-school environment, saying that age related or above and there being all, the whole class put below. And that’s not the teacher gaming in any way thinking oh I’ll trick the system it’s a lack of confidence. And a worry about showing that progress, I think.

**And in terms of the impact of curriculum reform and grammar and writing. Because I know that you’ve written. I was looking at your blog the other day about the actual research that you’ve done and the Hallidayan approach to language analysis which is just brilliant.**

Oh, thank you.

**I loved it. I mean Halliday has so much to add into education. The curriculum just does not recognise that way of thinking about language at all. Have you seen any impact upon writing that you would say is a little bit problematic in terms of grammar at all or the sort of insertion of features just for the sake of it and things like that?**

Absolutely. I mean the fronted adverbials thing is that all day long. It’s for the sake of it writing isn’t it, because my teacher says. And some of the grammar test is so subjective isn’t it. So that is where teachers have sort of almost, even if you’re a very experienced teacher and you say you’ll never do it in a million years, sort of almost forced to teach the test.

**Yeah definitely.**

Because there’s oh how are they going to know the right answer just by the. I’m going to have to teach them. You know it’s yeah.

**That’s so true I think what you just said the idea that even though teachers don’t believe in the things that they are doing they’re forced to do things that they don’t necessarily believe in like teaching writing with a sort of paint by numbers approach, or teaching grammar out of context.**

Yeah and no-one signs up to do that do they. No-one says I want to be a teacher because I want to get kids to pass tests, or grown ups or whoever to pass tests.

**Right exactly.**

That’s never going to be the motivation is it.

**Exactly. And the curriculum is not meant to say anything about pedagogy. It’s just meant to say something about content but it actually doesn’t because it forces teachers into pedagogies.**

Yeah. And actually, that’s really kind of where my blog came from really. Because I was doing some of my stuff, not really thinking about it, it was really on my own pedagogy practice doing it almost privately and quietly on the side like I’m being naughty, like a troublemaker, with sort of newer colleagues who haven’t maybe so much experience, were starting to realise that people are very, very skills focused and I think that’s really problematic. And I think the other reason it’s problematic other than from a teacher’s perspective is because it tells whoever’s in that classroom that that’s what they should expect. And I’ve got quite a big problem with that because those primary school children are going to become secondary school children, and those secondary school children are going to become young people in further education and then adults. So I get people walking in the room who sort of think that they will sit and listen to me and they’re an empty vessel and I will fill them up and they will learn these very careful skills, and perhaps they’re doing maths at the same time say. Maths has more elements of that so then there’s this expectation they’ll say but where do I put my commas and I’ll say it depends. Or how’s my grammar affected here and I’ll say it depends. They don’t like it. People aren’t expected to think critically in that shallow system.

**Yeah but the tests frame language like that don’t they. The tests reduce language to a set of right and wrong answers.**

They do. And absolutely it’s very reductive indeed.

**That’s just not what language is. It’s just not how it works.**

It’s not what language is. And it’s not what language is creatively and. You look at some of, the callimer who we celebrate it’s because of broken rules and creativity isn’t it. And I think teaching should be about creativity, I think. It should be reacting to who’s in the room and not what a test or a bit of paper says.

**I couldn’t agree more.**

It’s more bonkers. I mean I’ve had a little bit more leeway until very recently because now they’ve reformed us and we’ve just been narrowed and I’m just like oh god here we go, how’s it going to play out with adult functional skills. And the excuses are being more robust, why, by who’s judgement is this robust you know.

**Yeah. I mean when Nick Gibb talks about the fact that because the test results are increasing and writing quality is increasing. I haven’t spoken to a single teacher who says yeah, I think writing’s improved as a result of the grammar emphasis on the curriculum. And again, I think that’s. I have to be careful; I’m not suggesting that knowing something about grammar doesn’t make you a better writer, it can do.**

Absolutely yeah.

**But if it’s taught decontextualised then it won’t have an effect on your writing. And research.**

And if it’s punitive then it’s not fun. We don’t want to do it if it’s not fun. I’m not enjoying it. And I think, I know it’s not quite the same because it’s a bit broader, but that’s where the reading for pleasure and the writing for pleasure sort of research and there’s so much steam now with primary school teachers getting involved because this is joyful, this is creative, and it is for children as well. I mean I had, was it last year or the year before, I was doing GCSE mock ups because of going into further education then, if you haven’t got your GCSE already we used to be able to offer several different options in functional skills, it’s fantastic because it’s about real every day language in context. Whereas GCSE English Language not necessarily so much. I’m sat with 2 boys and they were revising, we’re going to practise this stuff ready for the exams. One of them saying to me, who’s this relevant to me I’m going to be a motor mechanic, why do I have to do this. And you know they’re, this isn’t fun, this isn’t joyful and language should be really because language is our gateway to everything else. And I’m trying to say this to this lad and say, if you want to be a good motor mechanic, need good language skills right.

**Yeah sure.**

People come to the garage and you want to engage with people and be able to explain what’s wrong with their car.

**Yeah definitely.**

So why do I have to write a story about a workman stood on a cliff. I don’t know really. I can’t answer that. And as a teacher you feel like you need to be able to say oh because it’s a useful thing. But it’s not is it.

**It’s fascinating.**

Sorry I’m being too critical aren’t I. It is fascinating.

**No not at all. The research is inherently critical that’s my starting point with it that the tests. I know the tests problematic and I know the teachers view them as problematic but I’ve acquired those views through my own thoughts but also very anecdotally talking to teachers. So these interviews are me trying to formalise that a bit more.**

I guess what I’m saying is it just pass the context of the grammar test and just because we’re at year 6. And these are actual people aren’t they. These are human beings and how they experience their education is going to affect their future lives and how they approach things. So if it’s difficult, if it feels out of context, if they can’t see the relevance, it has a really negative affect. Occasionally you see some, obviously behaviours a big one at the moment isn’t it when you hear about difficult and bad behaviour. There are issues here about schooling when it’s very, very narrow. It’s kind of 1 size fits all and that’s not true. They kind of use learning as a very, very straight line doesn’t it. I’m going to go from this point when I come into reception. I’m going to be at this point at year 2 SATs. I’m going to be at this point by year 6 SATs. And that of course from our perspective as governors there’s another issue there about drop year 2 SATs results to year 3 because the expectation is well, they’re age related in year 10. So they’ll be age related at year 6.

**Wow okay.**

So that’s hard. And you know that historically it’s going to be looked at, well why are these children dropping behind. Well they’re not actually dropping behind, you know.

**Fascinating. Well.**

It is isn’t it.

**It is and there’s so much to go on there. But what’s really interesting is that all the things that you’ve said have really echoed what a lot of the other teachers that I’ve spoken to so far have said so in this quite early point in the research it suggests that there’s a very prevalent pattern in that teachers are very critical of the tests and that they appear to have a lot of power in how they might coerce them as such into pedagogies that they don’t necessarily believe in. I think that’s probably going to be the message of what I’m writing about here. Is there anything else that you’d like to comment on or revisit or clarify at all, anything that you’ve spoken about so far. Because I think that’s pretty much the end of my questions as such really. I think we’ve covered what I wanted to.**

No, I don’t think so. Probably thought of loads more examples as we’re chatting actually.

**It’s been fascinating thank you Keisha and thanks for your time. If you think of anything else then feel free just to get back in touch. I’ll stop the recording now and just.**