**Alex**

**OK if we could get started with you just describing a little bit about how long you’ve been teaching, what your current role is, and whether you’ve taught both or either of the key stage 1 and 2 tests.**

I qualified in Autumn 2012. I completed my NQT after a bit of a rocky start in Spring 2016. I’m currently a class teacher, it’s an predominantly Asian school in east London where I’ve been there since Christmas 2015. I currently work with year 5 but for the last few years, for 3 consecutive years in a row, I was working with year 6. So I’ve had experience of teaching spelling, punctuation and grammar preparing children for the spelling punctuation and grammar tests under the pre-2014 curriculum and the post-2014 curriculum.

**Okay interesting. So you’ve seen the tests coming into play so you’ve got an idea of what schools were like before and after those tests were introduced.**

Yeah.

**Excellent. What are your general feelings about the tests then and the way that they’ve perhaps changed or impacted upon what you do as a teacher and also your general classroom teaching with year 5 and 6 then?**

The other thing I was going to say as well is that I have 2 children of my own. And one is currently in year 3 and the other one is currently in year 6, so I’ve kind of seen as a parent governor. I’m a parent governor at their school as well, I’ve seen the impact it has on their school too. So speaking from kind of all of those perspectives I sense that there is a drive towards kind of teaching to tests as it were, you might be familiar with that terminology.

**Yeah definitely.**

Where the focus isn’t about the kind of skill and how it’s applied, but essentially it’s more about how well the children and each cohort does in terms of their performance and the percentages or their schools, whether they’re skill schools or they’re law schools for the spelling punctuation and grammar tests.

**Right I see. And so it sounds like what you’re saying then that that kind of teaching to the test agenda if you will, is that something that you would say has changed since the introduction of those tests then?**

Yeah I mean when I first was directed to teach grammar it felt like a part of the school timetable where it was very kind of regimented that we were working with a company publication produced by Scholastic you might be familiar there’s a couple of companies who produce these kind of ready made studying punctuation grammar work books. And essentially it was just a page turning exercise where there wasn’t much teacher input. If the children are familiar with it then they would just kind of work through the exercises fairly rapidly. And then the other who didn’t have that familiarity would just be sitting there staring at the page and thinking well why am I doing this, what’s the reasoning or what’s the kind of intent as it were.

**Sure okay that’s interesting. And it doesn’t sound like that’s much fun to teach for you either.**

Not really. It’s pretty soul destroying to be honest. I mean I suppose from a key stage 1 point of view, to get children working on work books like that it’s a little bit more fulfilling because we are able then to engage in this kind of vocabulary building, handwriting styles and being able to kind of expand the activities by talking about what they see and what they’re doing. Whereas by key stage 2 there isn’t that kind of scope almost. I’m just looking at a work book right now. So one of the pages I’m looking at is expanded now stages. There’s an explanation. There’s a couple of examples and then that’s it, there’s not much else. There’s 5 or 6 sentences for the children to then follow the activity, to be a little bit more creative by writing their own. And then a close to be able to explain what expanded now phrases are and how they’re used. But other than that that’s like 15-20 minutes of an activity which I’m not entirely sure engages a learner in a kind of meaningful way.

**Definitely.**

Whereas if I’m teaching a piece of creative writing there’s plenty of scope to talk about where you’re directing that creativity and enabling learners to really broaden their thinking as it were.

**Of course. So the tests have changed pedagogies then?**

Yeah absolutely. Much more towards very dry bits of teaching you know**.** And that it replicated by the test itself. So the workbook format is exactly in the style that the final test paper in key stage 2 and to an extent also the key stage 1 kind of reading papers too. So it has its purpose but it’s kind of lacks that wow factor. When as a teacher I’d like to think that my classroom practise is much more kind of inquisitive in approach where children can then actually think more broadly and there is no right or wrong answers it’s about developing their communication, critical thinking and other kind of skills that we’d respect as adults.

**Absolutely yeah. How powerful then do you think the tests are then because you talk quite a bit about how they’ve affected life at your school and your teaching. Would you agree with that idea that the tests do carry a certain amount of power then in how they control teaching then?.**

Oh definitely. I wouldn’t deny that they’re extremely powerful. But clearly from kind of working in a school and being a parent I can see the kind of pressure that schools are under not just at primary level but right through the education system where performativity, to use that kind of technical term, is key and critical and is the focus. My head of school will speak kindly and wisely of all the pedagogical reasoning of why he needs a strong team of practitioners but the reality of it is that ultimately it’s about those numbers that are published at the end of July beginning of August which rate and rank the school for how well the key stage 1 and key stage 2 test results appear.

**Right absolutely. So the pressure, and to use your word of performativity, that comes from the publishing of statistics, it comes maybe from management which ultimately I mean I’m not blaming management because obviously they’re under pressure from government as well.**

No exactly. And this is one of the things that kind of irks me about social media that there are so many kind of factions as it were who are either for or against this kind of notion of performativity but really rather than sniping at each other to say my pedagogical reasoning for going down this route is sound and action be criticised, we should be talking to. We should be engaging in our political masters and saying well actually what you’ve done, what the Department for Education kind of the OECD have done is that by putting these measures on learners educational experience which created this kind of monster almost, everybody is then focused and looking at being able to measure a learners progress.

**Yeah definitely. And you mentioned politicians there. I was going to ask about Nick Gibb I’m afraid. Gibb is consistently kind of defended the tests mostly on the grounds that they lead to students improving their writing abilities. What would you say to that and what’s your perception of the impact on writing ability and creativity that the tests have had?**

I think they have a negligible impact. I think it’s more kind of relevant for me as a teacher to take an example from Jacqueline Wilson. I got to meet her yesterday at a kind of an afternoon with, or kind of Jacqueline Wilson in conversation. And what Jacqueline Wilson would say was that her early experience of writing from the age of 6, was to be given a diary and to be able to do that free writing, which is what my teacher training experience showed me as well. And I’ve certainly kind of embraced that with my own family and I can see that their writing, I think, is significantly more developed because of that practical experience of just simply writing, without fear or favour really. And if it gives them pleasure, just to spend 10 minutes writing a day, without any boundaries or constraints, then by the time that they do get into that point in their learning where they’re expected to write a 500-600 word composition, that isn’t so fearful and they will have had that experience of being able to organise ideas and put those ideas down in a logical coherent and comprehensible composition.

**Yeah definitely that makes a lot of sense. And again a lot of the teachers that I’ve spoken to have talked about how the emphasis on the technical parts of grammar and the identification and the feature spotting that the tests assess is arguably a little bit reductive in the sense that it’s very decontextualised grammar which then leads to very artificial writing pedagogies. Is that something that resonates with what you see?**

Absolutely. And my kind of, my personal solution on the complementary side from the writing is to expose children to reading. And there’s a sense in me and a few of my colleagues when we were reflecting on this recently at a professional development day, where the art of storytelling is rather lost. And children just don’t seem to have that grasp of being able to just retell stories in a way that I seem to remember as a child. The absence of programmes like Jackanory where it’s just a talking head reading a story or telling a story to some illustrations, those programmes just don’t seem to exist anymore, and as a result what’s happening is that there seems to be a lot of this kind of short, sharp shock way of making something interesting and exciting to watch and recount. But other than that that’s it. A real example of that was the last half term I’ve been teaching a Midsummer’s Night’s Dream. And showing the children the CBeebies adaptation of that play was a wonderful enriching experience for them to be exposed to the original Shakespearian text. But when we asked them to recount that tale they went straight from the point where the mechanicals were allocated their parts in the play to the performance without being able to engage in the characterisation to understand that each of the characters may have been reluctant to take their roles. And Nick Dobson was kind of just so kind of centre stage as it were, and trying to get all of those ideas out of children is really quite a struggle, and it took a lot of effort and it took a lot of scaffolding. So it doesn’t give us much time then to look at the spelling and the grammar. So we then expected to look at the spelling and the grammar you’ve then got to spend another 10, 15, 20 minutes a day focusing on that as well, and it just eats up so much of the school timetable.

**Sure. So what you’re saying then it sounds like is that the emphasis on grammar, you want students to know and love language of course.**

Yes.

**But the way that grammar is framed and presented to teachers and students in those tests is arguably a little bit reductive in the sense that it’s narrowed your curriculum, is that a fair?**

Yes precisely. And another real example of that is there are a couple of children in my class who are measured as being, this phrase called greater depth, so at the school that I work for, we moderate the children’s performance in terms of being on age related expectation or working within or working below or at greater depth. And the boys and girls who are at greater depth they’re showing all the spelling punctuation and grammar skills but because of the quality of their writing, as I was saying about the Midsummer’s Night’s Dream experience, it’s so shallow, they’re technically competent writers, but their creativity and their understanding and their use of expression is just so dry, it makes for really tricky reading. But when I show a piece of work like that to my senior colleagues for moderation purposes I will get criticised for saying that because the assessment cycle means that well actually they’ve used fronted adverbials, they’ve used colons as a year 6 child and being able to understand the purpose of the colon in this context and so on. And it makes me feel a little bit kind of detracts from the original purpose of the writing.

**Definitely.**

Which makes it an enjoyable piece to write and read.

**Definitely. And I’m getting a sense that you as a teacher feel quite frustrated in the type of teaching that you’re being forced or intimidated even into if you will because of the curriculum and the way that the tests are designed.**

It is a little frustrating. But there are ways and means of making that much more creative. My kind of real example is that on a Friday after school I run an after school club called A Global Citizenship. And what I do with that club is that, and they’re aimed at year 5 and year 6 children. There are no rules about the writing expectation but the whole purpose of the club meeting is to engage this kind of vocabulary building critical thinking being able to focus on their speaking and listening skills, and then engage them in that piece of writing. So for example the last meeting we had a couple of weeks ago was looking at roles in the theatre. And we watched a video of a costume designer and talking about her attitude towards costume designs, why did she feel the way she does working for the company she works for. And the children were then able to express themselves and write a reflection on that which hopefully then enabled them to think about the grammar and the spelling and punctuation rules that they would have learnt during the week. But I don’t assess that piece of work, it’s merely just to engage them in that pen to paper moment.

**Yeah brilliant. And that sounds absolutely brilliant but I can’t help thinking that that’s something that takes place after school in your own time, it’s supposedly non-compulsory so it’s this, all of those good things that you’re doing with language fall outside the kind of set timetable and there seems something deeply wrong with that I think.**

Yeah but it’s then by running a project like this it means that I’m able then to show senior colleagues that this kind of activity can happen after school, so there’s no reason why we don’t translate that into our afternoon teaching through geography and history and all the foundation subjects.

**I see that makes sense. Well best of luck with it. I hope that your management value it. I’m sure they do. I’m just going to go back to something that you mentioned earlier if that’s okay Allen.**

Yes of course.

**You used the words right and wrong to talk about the way that language is framed in those tests. And that’s something that a lot of other teachers that I’ve spoken to, and I’ve looked at the language of those tests as well have picked up on and that teachers seem to have a bit of a problem and an issue with the way that, I suppose it’s a very evaluative way of looking at language that isn’t it in terms of.**

Absolutely and this is probably the reasons why so many people seem to be opposed to the grammar school entrance exams. My daughter’s just done a whole set of them, where they do these verbal reasoning tests which are very similar to the grammar spelling punctuation tests that we do in the state sector. And there is this lack of creativity which is I think as you say frustrates many practitioners, and the fact that there isn’t this kind of scope for open answers, a comma has to be positioned in this statement, in this way to break up the meaning of the thing. I mean I understand that we need to encourage all learners to be able to understand the rules of writing because when they get into adulthood. Before I became a teacher I was a civil servant, and the civil servant it’s just full of work smiths and you have to then be able to explain to learners that this is the way the world works in a place where we are very driven by words and words mean the interpretation of rules and laws. How it’s written means that people can interpret what a rule or a law in one way or another. And being able to show that intent and get them to think philosophically about the way words work it then potentially enables them to engage in a much more practical way learning some of these grammar rules.

**That makes sense. But the tests are quite prescriptive aren’t they in the way.**

Oh yeah absolutely. And I just think. I mean I remember working in year 6, I’d run a Saturday morning revision session for some of my students, and we would just practice these skills in 10 minute chunks, which is fine, but it’s just again, it’s this thing where we’re learning by rope and we’re teaching for test. Yeah the tests and the curriculum are just another burden on teachers time and it’s just so soul destroying from an educational perspective. But I can understand and see why people do it.

**Yeah definitely. It’s so interesting what you’re saying. One final thing that I’d just like to ask about if that’s okay and then I promise I’ll let you get to your half term. It picks up again on that kind of right, wrong distinction in language which I’d agree is very prescriptive and quite reductive. And again thinking about what other teachers that I’ve spoken to have said, they’ve talked a lot about how that frames regional variation and non-standard forms of the language as incorrect somehow or is wrong. And teachers have a real issue with that because they’re saying well students are almost kind of forced into labelling their dialect as something that’s wrong, and that doesn’t seem right at all in schools.**

Yeah. I must admit as a life-long Londoner I haven’t encountered that kind of regional divide, but I do understand from colleagues and associates I speak to on a national scale where people will feel that that erodes their kind of identity almost.

**Definitely.**

The challenge of teaching in London is that we work with families whose English is not a 1st language and so the expectation is that we are showing a little bit of our Britishness as it were in showing them the rules that we’re encouraged to follow. By way of example again, apart from using the Scholastic scheme I also use Scofield and things, I also use a couple of books produced by Oxford University Press to accompany their children’s dictionary series the punctuation and grammar series, I’m sure you’re familiar with those 2, blue version and the green version.

**Yeah I know them.**

The green version I think is for the younger readers.

**That’s really interesting what you say about variety and variation and things like that. Interesting. I’m just looking back at the list of my questions now and it’s just been fascinating hearing you Allen and I’ve been nodding along as I’ve been listening because I’m very critical of the tests myself as well so it’s been interesting to hear your criticisms of them too. I think that’s almost at the end of my questions as such. Was there anything that you would like to comment on or talk about that you wanted to but you haven’t had the chance to do so. Or anything that you want to revisit or clarify your position at all?**

No not at all. I mean the only thing I would say is that having shared these ideas with you, there is this deep thought in me that, where there isn’t an obvious solution to this. That we’re driven. I mean I’ve been. My background as I said before becoming a teacher, alongside being a teacher is that my 1st degree was in Economic & Social Policy and I’m really, really, deeply interested in how education has become from having this philanthropic origins in Victorian times to what it is today, kind of Ruskin speech moment where it becomes this instrument of industrial and economic strategy for every nation almost.

**Yeah sure.**

So there’s a sense in me where we can be very critical in looking at assessments and the way assessments impact on teaching and learning, but is there any kind of alternative, suitable alternative that politicians and policy makers and the general public will accept, particularly when education is now seen to be this kind of not just getting learners ready for adulthood but is seen as the entry point into employment.

**Yeah definitely.**

It is hard. I see that when I was previously involved in recruitment and the first thing we’d be looking at is how well somebody writes. And there’s a sense that we can be deeply critical as I say of whatever system is in place but there’s no clear solution like an alternative.

**I agree. I think this is a structural systemic issue within education and the marketplace of education and words like performativity that you’ve talked about spring to mind as well. And the assessment regime in education now I think is obviously rife, it creates statistics and numbers which have the impression of trust and accountability and league tables.**

Yeah precisely.

**And it seems really sad to me that grammar and knowledge about language has been reduced to that especially with such young children. I’m a linguist. I want children to know and love language, but I have deep reservations with the way that language is framed on those tests for some of the reasons that we’ve spoken about. So yeah I’m definitely in agreement with you there. I used to be a teacher, and my research now is obviously with teachers, and it makes me really sad I think sometimes to speak to teachers like yourself who have such good ideas for creativity in education and want to do certain things but the power of the tests in what they might make teachers do, even though they might not believe in those things, I think that’s a real problem and that’s really sad, and ultimately that’s the aim of this research to give a platform for teachers who feel like that with the ultimate aim of changing policy. But we’ll see. I mean we spoke about Nick Gibb who’s been very resistant to any criticism of tests.**

Yeah just the mention of Mr Gibbs’ name, it does remind me though. Like I say I’ve been following educational policy for goodness knows how long now, and it is interesting that he’s actually one of the few government ministers that’s held onto his post.

**That’s true yeah.**

For the longest time in office. Now one would question whether he is truly kind of committed to an education which would be a great reflection on his commitment as a policy maker, but alternatively one might say well actually isn’t this man a little bit stale, he served under Michael Gove, he served under all of these other government ministers, he’s been the Conservative education minister since they came to power in 2010.

**Yeah almost 10 years yeah.**

What direction does he have for taking us beyond this turbulent time in Britain.

**Absolutely. He seems to have certain ideologies and views about education.**

Definitely. And when you look at the. I mean people are beginning to see that politicians are not people who are speaking on behalf of their electorate, they seem to be very kind of self-driven and motivated by their own political careers.

**Absolutely. I met him once on a train actually Nick Gibb. I had a very interesting conversation.**

In a professional context or was it just in passing?

**It was just by chance, and I recognised him because I happened to know what he looks like and I thought this is my only chance I’m going to get to speak to him so.**

And was he quite engaging?

**As soon as I said that I was an academic he immediately became very cautious. He was perfectly polite and everything, it was quite clear within seconds that he had very conservative traditional views on what language education and primary school education should be like, and that was no surprise, I already knew that. It was interesting to speak to him. I mean Gibb should not be meddling in pedagogies, that’s the thing that I feel. He’s the Minister of State for School Standards, but he should not have say on how teachers teach. And increasingly the government I sense appear to want to encroach on that.**

Yeah. But equally from a policy. When I worked in civil service I saw so many of these policy people that were walking around with their heads in the clouds. And I can understand that there is a relationship between school standards and pedagogy, but it’s being able to kind of allow practitioners with years of experience of working with learners, the freedom to be able to say well if we deliver to these standards or can you give us free rein, it’s whether they will do that or not. I suspect not simply because they will say well actually the world works in a different way and we can’t possibly allow you to do that. And they might go back and look at the quote examples from history like the William Tindall experience or they’ll say things like we harp back to a golden era which John McGarry said in every.

**Yeah definitely. Well I’m going to end it there if that’s okay Allen but it’s been so interesting chatting to you and you’ve given me a lot of useful things. So your voice will definitely be in these publications as such as I say your name will be anonymised for ethical reasons of course.**

Thank you. And if there’s any follow up work. And the reason why I’m more than happy to help with projects like yours is. (transcription ended)