**Alice**

**You mentioned in your email then that you’re a key stage 2 teacher and you’re currently teaching year 6 is that right?**

That’s right yes.

**And how long have you been teaching for Alice?**

I’ve been teaching for 4 years. I’ve done 1 year in key stage 1. 2 years in key stage 5 and then this is my 2nd year in year 6. Honestly, I’ve been deemed worthy, I’ve got a 2nd year in there.

**Do primary school teachers, I guess tend to, those ones that are teaching year 5 and 6 especially tend to feel a bit more pressure perhaps in terms of the tests. Is that right?**

Absolutely yes. Unfortunately, as much as the government say, it’s not about the tests anymore, unfortunately we are judged by the local community and the school communities on those key stage 2 SATs results. But yes, the pressure is on, especially for year 6 to do well by the school kind of thing. The pressure is really on, you can really feel it.

**That’s interesting. And thinking about your general feeling of those grammar punctuation and spelling tests now, how do you feel about those, what’s your perception of them, your attitude towards them, have they change or effective, what happens in your teaching. Could you talk a little bit about those kind of things?**

Yes absolutely. We do, every school I would have thought, but this school that I work for particularly do a baseline set of tests in September for the year, for the cohort to see where they’re at. And then we aim our teaching especially for SPAG at the gaps that we see from those tests. Obviously, that’s a bit more difficult spelling wise because obviously you don’t really know what you’re going to get, but especially from the grammar point of view we’ll see what the cohort is weakest at and we will teach the gaps that are missing or the weak points within that year group. So that’s how we tend to use it as a first stage. I think it’s an extremely boring test, the children, my cohort believe it’s an extremely boring test and it does take quite a bit. But from my 2 years of experience and obviously the school that I used to work at in year 5, they started preparing them then for the SATs to see how they were getting on. And my general feeling from the students that I’ve had are that it takes quite a lot of self-control from their point to get through it because it is just a list of questions really. I say there’s not a lot of thinking involved that’s a lie, but it’s kind of, just a pointless process that they feel they’ve got to get through, which is awful. But yes, that is the grammar test from my point of view. My teaching tends to be to the test as well, because there are obviously a few bits that slip them up, like circle this, and underline that, and only put in 2 commas for example, which are things that tend to trip them up so that they lose marks. So in that respect I do quite a lot of test technique as well when it gets a bit closer to the time. I’m kind of forced into it.

**Interesting. Obviously, you talked earlier about the kind of pressure that the tests put teachers under. How do you feel as a teacher then in the sense that the tests? Because I think what you’re saying is that the tests have kind of changed your curriculum.**

Yes absolutely. Year 6 is a completely different way of teaching to any other year group that I’ve experienced unfortunately. Luckily, we have a headteacher who is very, wants them to do well but at the same time realises that they are only 10 and 11 and they do need a wider spice of life, not just teaching to the test. But I actually left the school that I was at the year before last when I was teaching year 5 because it was so test driven that all the year 6s, and a lot of the time the year 5s were doing was practicing to get those good results for schools. And my kind of morals there, I wasn’t happy to accept that.

**Sure. Nobody goes into teaching to spend their life preparing kids for tests.**

Absolutely.

**That doesn’t really. That’s not the most cited motivation for wanting to work with young children.**

No. And actually the SPAG test, although I understand that it’s good to see what skills that they have, I don’t see why the SPAG test couldn’t be part of the writing assessment rather than putting them through another test. Because obviously writing, with all those bits and pieces in there is the key stage 2 standard so it’s difficult for me as a teacher being responsible and thinking about these young people that it’s unnecessary really, especially with spelling. Spelling seems to be, for the last 4 years, has gone completely downhill, nobody seems to know how to spell anymore. But is it necessary for them to spell with essays being written on spell check and Google being a second away? I’m quite a poor speller myself so I’m always, oh hang on let me just Google that. All spellers find that test really stressful, as you would, because you’re looking at it going, I haven’t got any, which is as you can imagine a great set up for the 1st test that they have on that SATs week. I understand the value of testing because I do think it’s individual and it’s done on the day. And unfortunately, other schools that I’ve experienced from the writing point of view will completely adjust results, especially for writing because it’s not done on a test, tend to fiddle that a little bit shall I say. But I do think it’s a slightly less stressful way of them doing it as long as it’s done properly so I do see. And unfortunately, as much as we say as teachers, we should be trusted with this, unfortunately we do have some people still in the profession that will make up results basically. So I do understand the value of keeping check on us as well as the children. That’s the other thing. Every cohort is different so you can’t keep going up and up and up and getting good scores every year because that’s not reflective of the cohort. We have quite a high proportion of SEN this year in my year 6 cohort that won’t even be taking the SATs, so we’re already going to be low in the next year. And we’re happy to admit that’s what is going to happen because every cohort is different. But unfortunately, because of this drive to be higher or at the kind of age-related expectations throughout the whole country is so ingrained in, especially who I call the dinosaurs, bless them, people who have been in teaching a long, long time, since this was all set up. It’s kind of ingrained that we must get really, really good results, and not thinking about the individuals really of different year groups. Sorry I’m going off at a tangent.

**No, it’s really interesting and I’m getting the sense that there’s a sense of almost despair in the way that you’re talking about it and the kind of culture of testing in primary schools at the moment. And the power I suppose that those tests have to change the curriculum and change the way that you teach.**

Yes. They are powerful. They do have power because you know, they affect the whole school you know. They change the way you teach for sure.

**And thinking about the grammar knowledge that’s on those tests then. You mentioned that what you would like to see is that the grammar knowledge is embedded within the writing so much more contextualised. The grammar on the tests is very decontextualised then isn’t it.**

Yes, I would agree. When I started in year 6, I got my husband, he’s an electrician, to have a go at the test. And really because of his common sense knowledge and his knowledge of words, he got a very good score, because all he did was read the questions and pick out what it wasn’t going to be and what he was left with. So I found that really interesting, although as awful as it sounds, that is one way that I teach to the test now that I know that from someone who has been out of primary education for nearly 20 years. It was really interesting to see that he’d almost got all of them right, kind of the active and passive and all this, and past progressive, actually if you understand what those words are telling you, it’s fairly easy. But if I asked him to identify something like that in a book or say something in it, I don’t think he’d be able to do it.

**Right. Because the test, they’re obviously used very artificial synthesise sentences right to.**

Absolutely yeah.

**A lot of the other teachers that I’ve spoken to have really bemoaned this because they want to be doing work with grammar and language but not in the way that the tests steer them towards as such.**

No. And I think actually it’s a knowledge that they don’t need to understand. As I said in my email my mum is a secondary English teacher and she doesn’t teach any grammar at all. From when they leave primary to GCSE, they don’t do any of that, and obviously she’s got an English Literature and Language degree. And she said college, end of college, university, that is when you’re picking up that stuff again. So it just seems completely futile, why am I even doing this because they’re not going to be using it next year. And actually some of the bits that they say, like for instance, the inverted commas, actually what some secondary schools call those is actually quite a broad range, so they’re even going up to secondary and there’s a whole, new load of vocabulary that they’re having to learn as well, which is a bit of a.

**Well it just undoes all of that work that you do, and all of that time that you spend in year 5 and 6 teaching about grammar, if there’s no continuity either in teaching or in the terms used then it kind of must make you even more frustrated if that work and time that you’re doing doesn’t necessarily get continued as such.**

Yeah absolutely. And I can see it from their point of view because obviously my mum’s saying, well the quote marks, which they use a lot in secondary, in key stage 3 and key stage 4, is, that’s not an inverted comma because that’s something else. So I do kind of see that actually, yes maybe we should be more precise on that rather than having them all under one umbrella. But yes, so I do find it very frustrating and it kind of ingrains it in my mind that it is a bit of a waste of time to do that.

**Interesting. Another thing that’s come up throughout this research that I’ve been doing is, as well as the problems with the tests in terms of decontextualised grammar and the amount of time that teachers are spending teaching to the test as such. A lot of teachers have talked about problems with the way that standard English is really emphasised on those tests. And that the tests seem to be assessing a kind of right or wrong view of language where language is framed as something that’s either correct or incorrect as such. Is that something that’s come up in your thoughts or in your teaching at all?**

Yes I think so. I think the whole curriculum is set up in a way that makes non-standard speakers feel kind of picked on you know? The tests are one part of that, the curriculum, it all. Actually I was going to say about the standard English part of it because I am in Essex so that comes up quite a lot because the children speak in very non-standard forms and that does reflect, especially when they’re writing, but in a test like that they could pick out that it was wrong, so that’s what frustrates me being in a county with very non-standard English forms of speaking.

**Because you’ve got students who use local dialects and non-standard grammar but that’s not wrong at all it’s just that it’s framed as wrong on the tests.**

Yes absolutely. I think I think the way I differentiate it for the children is that verbal and written is different, and actually I’d say that it’s being formal and informal more than anything. It’s like, of course you can speak to your friend like that that’s fine because that’s part and parcel of the local area, but if you’re writing a letter to the local council, you’re not going to use that language so. I think the curriculum changes and the tests and all of the emphasis now on standard English has really made me change the way that I react to dialects and things in my classroom. You know now I feel like I have to kind of tell students off about the way they use dialect or whatever. And feel really not comfortable in doing that. I don’t want to be that person who does that because of course I value their dialect but it’s difficult to handle that when you’ve got those tests looming over you.

**OK. So that’s something that’s come about because of the curriculum reform you think?**

I think so a bit yes. It certainly feels more of a culture where that’s expected now. So yes, I think that’s kind of. Especially the Essex accent and what people say over here is it’s quite demonised as not being standard, so definitely. I know kids are really aware of it, how they speak. They feel as it’s not valued. I tear my hair out at the way that regional language is devalued on the curriculum and described as not correct because that’s their language.

**It’s very stigmatised the Essex accent in particular and often is the target of criticisms that are very unwarranted and very untrue, and for some people it carries really negative perceptions which is obviously really damaging if you’re a speaker of Essex accent and Essex dialect.**

Yes, and especially the girls I’d say, it’s very, we’re all stupid because we don’t speak properly, and we’ve got this kind of common kind of, you’re common because you speak like that. When like you say that’s not right, it’s just local dialects as you say. It carries a real stigma.

**And so do you think that students have those perceptions of themselves then because they speak in an Essex accent that they’re as you say kind of stupid or uneducated etc?**

I’d say they definitely conform to certain types of behaviour because of that definitely yes.

**That’s really interesting. I’d certainly like to talk to you a lot more about that, that might be a future project! One thing that the government have said then is that the tests have had a positive impact on writing if you look at Nick Gibbs’ rhetoric around the tests for example and the way that he defends the emphasis on grammar and the test is that he argues that students are writing in much better ways. Have you seen any evidence of this or would you say that the focus on grammar in the tests has had any impact on writing at all, be it positive or negative?**

I would say, from personal experience, it would be the teachers pushing, because obviously if you put someone through as exceeding expectations, age related expectations in writing then it would marry up that they did the same in the SPAG test. So I would say the relationship that I have seen is that the teachers are pushing for better writing standards to back up what they’re doing from the writing front. Because obviously if you had SPAG tests that were really low, but you’re putting lots of people through as high for the writing, then that wouldn’t make sense. So that I know my deputy head especially who deals with lots of the data has her finger on the pulse with that one because she’s expecting them to be fairly similar results. Although these SPAG results aren’t published or don’t have to be, it’s still something that we want to be aware of because we don’t want to be drawing attention to ourselves for any reason with regards to data. So I don’t think the standard of writing is better because the test is helping them be better. I think the teacher is directed towards the tests and so that they are covering lots of bits and pieces like the active and passive and the colon, semi-colon etc. And that is what I. Before I went into teaching, because I was actually a chemical analyst before I went into teaching, and I’d never used a semi-colon or a colon, but now I use them all the time in my general writing, emails, texts, which is a bit embarrassing. So that is because I’m having to use that because of the writing and the SPAG test. So I think I’d say I was evidence a little bit myself there for it’s the way that we are teaching and what we are teaching to cover rather than the tests themselves.

**I see that makes sense. I think that’s pretty much it in terms of my questions. Was there anything that you want to talk about or comment on that you haven’t had chance to do so, or anything that you want to revisit or clarify at all that you have spoken about?**

I think only one thing that I’d add in this. I don’t agree with testing children as young as this, however the issues that I’ve had in key stage 2 with moderation of writing especially, I’ve come at loggerheads with lots of schools and teachers who are, well cheating is probably the word overall, but obviously because the writing is not tested you, well I’ve had. I’ll just tell you. I’ve gone into schools and seen teaching assistants sitting down before a narration going through children’s books one at a time and picking out the mistakes for them and getting them to change it, so that there’s the evidence. And there is so much speculation around what actually moderators are looking for. Obviously for exceeding expectations in writing there’s expected to be a certain flair and obviously flair and imagination is subjective to whatever moderator is coming, because it is. And obviously I know they used to do the writing test, so I think if there’s any way of stopping that obviously it would be a nightmare because you would just be writing, writing, writing again to the test, but it is very. I think the writing moderation with regards to the testing and the end of year is what stresses teachers out than most, because the SPAG test is very easy to teach to. So many different things you can get out there, questions that are written the same, I’ve done that. So you can teach that one really to the test, but obviously imagination and writing you can’t do that. So that is probably one of the other big strains that I’d add in.

**That makes a lot of sense. Great okay well thanks so much Alice it’s been really nice to speak to you and hear your thoughts. And what you’ve said has resonated an awful lot with what a lot of the other teachers that I’ve spoken to have said. So there’s definitely some strong emerging patterns here which will hopefully lead to, well policy change is my ultimate aim for this research but we’ll see.**

That would be fabulous because. Yeah even if it takes a few more researchers to get on board and do some other bits and pieces. But yes, that would be fantastic, I think. But good luck with it.

**Thank you, Alice. And I’ll let you know about the publications that will come out of it and keep you up to date with those things. Just to remind you that your name will be anonymised so don’t worry at all. And yes, I’ll keep you up to date and thanks again for your time and enjoy the rest of your half term.**

Lovely. No worries thank you very much.

**Cheers Alice. Bye.**

Bye.