**Billy**

**Could you just very briefly outline what your current role is in school and how long you've been teaching for Billy, is that okay?**

Yes. So this is my 10th year of teaching. I've just started at a new school this summer, Year 5 teacher and lead for key stage 2. Prior to that for the last 4 years, I've been a Year 5 / 6 teacher and English lead at a smaller school.

**Brilliant. So you've got quite a lot of experience with dealing with the tests then presumably.**

Yes.

**Yes, okay. And I'm already noting a tone in your voice. So is it mostly the key stage 2 tests that you've been involved with then?**

Yes.

**Okay. Fab, no problem. So now just thinking about some very general questions about your perceptions of the tests so you've been teaching for 10 years so you've seen both the original tests in 2013 and the new tests in 2016. Could you just talk a little bit about your general feeling about those grammar tests then? And here you might talk about, I suppose, the way that you feel that they've affected or changed what happens in your classroom, the value of the tests, things like that. Is that okay?**

Yes. Well the grammar tests pretty much, by school leadership, are seen as fairly irrelevant because they don't count towards any statistics that the school is judged on and generally the SPAG test results are higher than anything else because the test is sort of looked on as, it’s a bit more straightforward in terms of the types of questions that are asked, there's lots of 'circle the answer', there's 'underline a word', there's 'join a box up.' In terms of a test, what they are as a vocabulary test, more than anything, it's testing children's ability to remember the names of a specific grammar element really. More than anything that's what it is and that's where some children become unstuck because they struggle to retain that sort of information.

**Yes, I see what you mean.**

Yes, they're a test that children quite like to do because as I said, it's quite a, they can always have a go at an answer because most questions are only worth one mark and they're quite easy to have a guess at.

**Yes, okay. So a couple of things there, so you see them most of all being about grammatical terminology when you talk about a vocabulary test. Is that right?**

Yes. So it’s a test as to whether the children can remember the name of a grammatical feature and what it does, essentially. Find this, underline this, circle this, you know.

**I see. And as a teacher do you see the value in preparing students to do that?**

In some cases, yes. What the tests have led to, which I don't necessarily agree with, is a lot of standalone grammar teaching where children complete worksheet exercises or tick box things or fill in the gaps to learn this grammar technique. And they learn that grammar technique for that and then they can use it in the test. What I then sometimes don't see is that knowledge crossing over into the writing which is actually where the grammar is the most important.

**Interesting, okay. So the tests, because the tests are decontextualized in the sense that they assess just bits of grammatical vocabulary, what you're saying is that they've then impacted on pedagogies because they've created these kind of standalone grammar lessons. Is that right?**

In terms of the grammar test that’s the biggest impact it had on the teaching [4:31] that there is now an awful lot more focus on these specific grammar lessons that you must be teaching grammar once a week and you must, but it's not, I wouldn’t say that those lessons are particularly good or particularly valuable or that the knowledge taken is necessarily retained and used in context.

**Okay. So those standalone grammar lessons, they're a new thing then are they, that's happened?**

Yes, they've cropped up since the introduction of the grammar test.

**Okay. So how did you, or did you teach grammar before the tests and if so how did you teach it?**

You taught it through, [5:06] sort of did those sorts of activities but you did them within your English lessons so that still is happening but it's all just linked together a bit more and you sort of do your English based on a book and you pick out the grammar from there but you never had to, beforehand you never had to necessarily go into all the terminology. I mean I never learnt most of this stuff in English lessons, all the grammar stuff that I learnt, I learnt through doing French at school.

**Right, I see. So, yes go ahead.**

I can't remember what I was going to say.

**Sorry. So the isolated grammar lessons that you teach then, are quite driven by terminology, by circling bits of grammar to do with their terms. Is that accurate?**

The isolated grammar lessons are a tick box exercise to teach children how to answer those kind of questions in a grammar test.

**Yes, okay.**

So that's very much a kind of teaching to the test pedagogy.

**Yes okay. And as a teacher, how do you feel about the time spent on the curriculum that is so, I suppose, directed towards tests like that?**

It's not ideal, it's not something you like to do having been in Year 6 the last few years, you spend a lot of time teaching to the test, not just in grammar but in everything. But I've been sort of, with the move to my new school I've found my new school is very much, they want teachers to be teaching these grammar lessons, whereas before I had a bit more control over what I taught so I taught a lot more of it through my English lessons and in the context which then made it more relevant and less, the children were learning what they needed to but it was less geared towards the test. They were still being taught how to sort of answer those questions but through their learning.

**Sure. It was contextualized a bit more.**

Yes. And it just had more relevance to them but we still had to do, you still had to teach those test skills because unfortunately the way the questions are worded and the way the test, there's always questions there to trip them up and [7:36] you're trying to build children's confidence to go into the test happy so it's striking that balance between not overdoing the test but also making sure children feel confident and ready to take the test.

**Sure. So you mentioned your new school, so that their policies of those isolated lessons, that's something that you've encountered since joining your new school then, so is that right?**

Yes.

**So that seems to suggest then that schools are doing different things about how to approach the test, some of them are having these isolated lessons.**

Yes, there isn't a consistent policy amongst schools. Every school teaches it slightly differently. In general, there is, in most schools, there is a specific grammar teaching element to it.

**Yes sure, okay. And going back to what you mentioned a little bit earlier about one of your perhaps frustrations I got the sense was that a lot of this grammatical knowledge, although you perhaps see the value in it isn't applicable or isn't applied to writing. Do you want to talk a little bit more about writing in the grammar tests then, if that's okay?**

Well, there is no writing in the grammar test really. There might be a sentence.

**Yes okay. So has it had an impact on writing at all then?**

Well it has, because the writing assessment framework has changed massively as a resource of the [9:15] grammar test which I'm sure you're aware of and especially, it was less obvious when it first came in but when it sort of was reinvented in 2016 there was the swing from creativity to grammar in terms of what was necessary in order to achieve what was deemed the expected standard. It went from valuing creativity more to completely being valued on the grammar.

**Right, I see.**

There started to be a shift back because there's been such a backlash from teachers, the fact that children are missing out because they haven't used a semicolon in any of their writing, they're writing completely brilliant and imaginative that really reflect the audience but the way the writing assessment is now is that you have to have included these specific elements within your writing and it does lead to a certain amount of, especially when you're in Year 6 or even in Year 2, when you've got these end of year assessments, you end up saying to children, 'I need to see brackets in your writing.' So they end up just shoehorning them in just because someone has said, 'oh you need to put one in to show me that you're deemed the expected standard.'

**Sure. And that seems a really artificial way of teaching writing.**

It’s a massively artificial way and it's not valuing, like I said, children's creativity or imagination. And it's penalizing a lot of children who are very good writers but struggle technically.

**Right, I see. Because they're being told that their creativity isn't valued because what is valued is having, a fronted adverbial or whatever, at the start of a sentence.**

Yes, because what I need to see is this, this, this and this. And the assessment framework, the way it is now is you have to have seen all these things in order for a child to be deemed at a particular standard.

**Right, so it’s a kind of jumping through the hoops approach to teaching writing.**

It’s a massively jumping through the hoops process and there's a lot more now as teachers. Having been in Year 6 I mean, the last years, because I worked in such a small school I've only had a cohorts of 6, 12 to 14 Year 6's so I could sort of keep track of all of them and [11:30] but when you're in a school where you've got a class of 30 to 35 you can't be doing that and there are some schools who are now saying, 'well we've got this assessment for Year 6, does anyone have the same thing for Year 5, Year 4, Year 3?' So there's much more of a [11:44] 'well if we need to see this, this, this this.' And there does need to be that [11:49] we do need some consistency across schools of what an expected standard is but having it as this rigid sort of tick-box thing where it causes more frustration because within local authorities there are different moderation processes even though it should be one but it just seems to be that there isn't a consistent system across the country or even between schools within the same local authority. It can lead to confusion.

**Yes definitely. And I'm getting a sense that the impact on writing and this kind of jumping through the hoops writing pedagogies that the curriculum almost forces teachers to engage in is a real source of frustration for you.**

Yes absolutely.

**Yes, I know you mentioned it in your survey results as well.**

And it leads to children losing engagement, losing interest if they can't use these things.

**Of course, that’s really interesting to hear. And it reflects so much from what a lot of other teachers that I've spoken to for this research are saying as well, that the impact on writing is having such an adverse and negative and quite damaging effect.**

Yes. What also is a struggle within, especially within schools because I'm based in Yorkshire, is that a lot of the children don't use the correct grammar when they speak, they don't hear the correct grammar when they're at home, we've got a lot of staff who don't know the correct grammar or use correct grammar. So I was in observing a Year 6 lesson the other day and on the board, the teacher had punctuated a sentence wrongly as it were, for a Year 6. There was a comma where there should have been a semicolon and if the teachers aren't confident with it then you can't expect the children to be. When they're reading books there's a lot of authors that don't [14:04] the authors can do what they like but if you're using that as your model within the classroom it can be quite difficult and you then [14:15] you've got children saying, 'well you haven't used this' and they're a writer [14:21].

**Yes definitely. Genuine question. That leads me quite nicely onto what I was going to ask about next which is about the kind of notions of correct or incorrect grammar and thinking about standard or non-standard English. In the test but also in curriculum policy and things like the teacher's standards as well, in one of the survey questions, you wrote that there's an expectation that the correct use of English is modelled when speaking to children but this can be hard for people who speak with particular dialects or regional accents. Could you just talk a little bit about what you mean there in terms of perhaps your schools policy to how they deal with those kind of instances?**

The expectation is that people do model the correct grammar but there's a particular dialect and the one that gets used, 'we was, we was going' and that comes up a lot and it's one of those things, if it's heard within a lesson and it's then picked up on, fed back but it's quite difficult to then change that kind of thing because it's how a person speaks, they've been speaking that way for 30, 40, 50 years.

**Yes. Oh, so you're talking about teachers now not students?**

Not so much students, more teachers, because when you hear it with students or when you see it with students you pick up on it and you address it where you can.

**And how do you do that? How do you pick up on non-standard constructions like that?**

If they give an answer in class it's about going back and saying, 'did you mean that?' or 'are you sure that's correct?' and just getting them to think about what they've said or then talking about it altogether and getting that [16:11] between children as to what isn't the notion for correct. But it's also saying to them, 'it's not that you're wrong.'

**That sounds like a really tricky thing to manage because we have words like correct and incorrect but then you're also saying you don't want to talk about children's language being wrong.**

Yes, you don't.

**How do you manage and navigate that as a teacher then, when you have children and teachers speaking in non-standard form?**

I mean, there's a common phrase in my classroom which is not, I'm not particularly proud of it, but it is that English is a stupid language. And we'll learn this rule and we'll learn these patterns but there are always exceptions, there are always exceptions. English language is a marvellous language but it’s a very fluid language and it's one that’s interpreted in many different ways and some children particularly like the test because they like a set of rules and they like a 'this is the right answer, this is the wrong answer'. And they like that they really enjoy that sort of thing because they value it when they get it right [17:27].

**Sure, I see that.**

Others just don't understand why, what they have said is right or wrong so it's about picking it up and that’s why it's so important that, where possible, staff, anyone in the school is modelling that sort of notion of standard English and the correct as it were. Because the more the children hear it the more they take it in. They're [17:56] if you've got a teacher who comes from Southern England and 'good afternoon,' they say it a few times and then you hear it in the register when they're saying good afternoon, all the children start saying 'good afternoon.' They pick up on the clues of what people say around them.

**I see. And the kind of modelling of standard English that you've been talking about and those notions of correct and incorrect language. Again, is that something that you feel has been emphasized in recent years, thinking about the way that language is talked about in the tests or perhaps curriculum policy?**

That is something that, the idea of children writing structurally correct sentences is really important and that's right and things like 'we was' and 'we were' they are, that is something that children need to be aware of and are picked up on but it has led to a sort of, more of a focus on that and probably should be on that within teaching and within tests.

**Yes sure. I guess, I completely see what you mean about the need for children to have access to standard English. I suppose the alternative to that is there's a worry that if children are being picked up on their language then it might have a negative effect on their own perception of their dialect.**

Yes.

**Is that something that you consider as a school at all in the policies that you have for dealing with non-standard language?**

It's not necessarily within the policy, it's something that people are very aware of and I think probably within a school like where I am at the moment, because it's, we have a large portion of people who do speak with very much a Yorkshire dialect, it becomes more prevalent and more, but again, like you said, we've got a lot of children, a lot of staff who are proud to be Yorkshire.

**Yes, rightly so.**

And exactly. And you don't want to, and they're not going to change. There's sometimes a perception, 'oh I can't, I just can't do it, I'm not going to' and it's trying to get over that. It's not about changing who you are but it's about modelling it to [20:33] the children.

**Yes, I see.**

What can be a struggle, and I don't know enough about it, but you'll probably look at it through your research is that, there is a big gulf between the expectations, I'm going off track here, primary and secondary.

**Oh yes, definitely.**

I would say in terms of the expectations of grammar but then as children go out into their daily life they see it modelled completely wrongly all over the place and it's not valued within the wider society so there does then come that thing then of why is it so vital in Years 3,4,5,6? Why is it so vital there and then forgotten about?

**Yes definitely. I've written a little bit about that sort of incongruence between primary and secondary but yes you're right, that a lot of secondary school teachers talk about the fact that a lot of beginning key stage 3 children start secondary school with a whole host of grammatical terms but have very little experience of applying it meaningfully because of the tests. And that's not a criticism of primary school teachers at all. And a lot of secondary school teachers say, 'well we're going to forget all of that stuff now.'**

Yes, and that's another mixed message that children get. But I think that there's a lot of work that needs to be done on that transition between primary and secondary. I don't think secondary teachers are necessarily fully aware of what the expectations are in Year 6 and primary teachers aren't aware of the challenges facing them, [22:17] secondary school teachers. There's still a lot of work to do there because there is a sort of them and us mentality an awful lot.

**Yes absolutely. I think that's really really true. I'm just looking down my list of questions and trying to think about anything else that I'd like to ask you that we haven't done. But I think I'm starting to get a fairly good picture of your perceptions Billy, so I'm getting the feeling that you value children knowing about language but perhaps not necessarily in the way that it's tested at the moment.**

The idea of getting children to write using correct punctuation and structuring their sentences and thinking about how to develop their writing through using different styles of writing through different elements of grammar is great and lots more needs to be done on that but to then test it through a, find that all the determiners in this sentence, mentality is, or find, the worse ones are things like, 'identify the conjunctions in these sentences' where they'll be 3 sentences and 2 of them, the conjunctions Billy sort of be in the middle of the sentence and one, the conjunction Billy be at the start. And to test children through a thing like that, where if they're used to that style of questioning and they know about the tricks they'll be fine. But if not they just, they won't understand and they'll just circle anything. It's not beneficial and doesn't accurately assess a child's grasp of grammar and those sort of terms.

**Yes. And I also get that there's an issue here with the kind of right and wrong way of thinking about language. I totally agree that children need access to the standard language. At the same time maybe the way that language is talked about in the tests in terms of it being right or wrong is perhaps a little bit of a kind of reductive way of thinking about language, would you say that's accurate?**

Yes. I mean I'm quite fortunate in a way in that I've always grown up with quite a good spoken language and I've always sort of just had that naturally and that sort of, that I was able to write. But seeing an awful lot of children who don't have that [25:00] or that grounding for whatever reason, it's hard to then teach that.

**Yes of course. I see. And you've also talked a lot about, I suppose the kind of disconnect between grammar and writing and some of the issues with the writing pedagogies at the moment and the kind of artificial writing pedagogies that teachers I suppose, can be coerced into engaging with.**

Like I said the pendulum started to swing back around again and there is now much more of a focus on all these things being taught through writing so children see through context and how they're applied and it's still not, it's not anywhere near there in any way right at the moment.

**Sure, okay. That's really interesting, thank you so much Billy. I think that's pretty much covered the questions that I had and it's been really fascinating and interesting to hear your views. Was there anything at all that you wanted to talk about that you haven't done or anything that you'd like to revisit or clarify at all that you've spoken about in this interview?**

I don't think so.

**Okay. Well again, I'll just say thank you for giving up your time and lots of really interesting data there and yes, very much resonates with what a lot of the other teachers that I've interviewed say as well. So I'm starting to see some.**

That's good.

**Yes. I'm starting to see some emerging patterns which should hopefully lead to, well policy change is the ultimate aim of this research and in giving teachers a voice in some of the criticisms that they have of things so, yes thanks very much again for your time and if you're interested I'm very happy to keep you up to date with the academic publications that Billy arise out of this study.**

Yes please.

**I'm very happy to send you those for you to have a look at. All the data Billy be anonymised of course so you won't see your name in there but your voice Billy be in there as such if that's okay.**

Yes great.

**Great. Okay, well thanks so much, Billy.**

No problem.