**Iris**

**Okay. Could you begin by just briefly outlining what key stages you currently teach?**

I'm actually in Year 2 from September for the first time in a long time and I've seen how they conduct their SEN testing but I was a Year 6 teacher for about 10 years so I'm more confident speaking about the assessment process there.

**Okay, sure, no problem.**

[0:24] But I can talk briefly about key stage 1. I can certainly talk about, if it's that grammar you're focused on, I don't know, but I can talk about phonics screening in Year 1 because I've been in Year 1 for 2 years now. I'm probably more confident with the assessment now, but that’s not always been the way [0.45].

**We'll maybe talk about key stage 2 generally and then, I mean it doesn’t matter so much if there's no differentiation made between key stage 1 and 2, it's just a general perception of the tests.**

Yes.

**So you mentioned that you've been teaching for 10 years did you say?**

I was in Year 6 for 10 years; I've been teaching in total for 20 years now.

**Okay, right. So you must have seen quite a bit of change then, over that time.**

Well I started as a secondary art teacher and then about a year and a half in I switched to primary and so yes, obviously when I started it was like the literacy hour, grammar for writing, spelling [1:28] all of those resources which nobody uses any more. So yes [1:34] sort of prescriptive modular way of teaching literacy as it was known then, to actually sort of becoming English and then teaching English in a more, how can I put it? Maybe a more organic way, in the last 10 years I would say. Very different to how grammar is on the curriculum now I think.

**Right, okay. And by organic what do you mean by that exactly?**

I mean in a way that we start looking at, when we're looking at learning objectives we're also looking at success criteria as being a lot less prescriptive so we're looking at the, I think I said this on the Twitter feed, Michael Rosen and this idea about focusing on audience and purpose and not being led so much by grammar, although I have, as English lead, seen that over the last year. I’ve seen lots of teaching to the test, lots of teachers doing test questions in class over and over again. Whereas before we were teaching 60 minutes in 3 blocks of 20 with a literacy [2:42] which also included grammar for writing for 20 minutes. Well I think the resources for grammar for writing were okay as it goes, I didn't really have an issue with them at the time or in retrospect of sort of looking back I don't really feel, reflecting now, that resources [3:02] themselves were not fit for purpose but I think that the way that we taught was very much more structured. Whereas now we have more time to immerse children in the text type or the, I know we don't say genre now but the audience and purpose of the text and that way of teaching is what I mean by being more organic, actually allowing it to be a bit more divergent and looking at different types of text which deal with similar things.

**Sure, okay. So since the tests came into place in 2016 then could you perhaps just talk a little bit about your general feeling about those tests? Particularly the grammar, punctuation and spelling tests and I suppose a little bit perhaps about the way that they might have affected or changed what happens in your classroom, in your school in terms of pedagogy but also perhaps policy that your school might have.**

Yes, well firstly I would say that any government that comes in wants to change the way we teach. And I think they know that the most efficient and economical way of doing that is to change the assessment criteria, and so teachers become pushed into teaching to the test. If you want to change practice then you change the way we assess children's [4:31] attainment first and foremost, I think that has, that's the most efficient way of doing it. And I've seen that, obviously I've had quite a lot of secretaries of state for education in my time and I remember it very sharply when Michael Gove was the secretary of state, particularly speaking to secretary colleagues in terms of more traditional text and things like Steinbeck writers like that, being almost removed from the curriculum and then when we were looking at reading in, perhaps more relevantly at the end of key stage 2 there was a lot more emphasis on traditional texts so when we were reading I remember with reciprocal reading model that we use, picture books, great picture books for instance Tuesday by David Wiesner I think his name is, that went out the window and then we were looking at Secret Garden, The Railway Children, quite hard texts to teach in terms of context and children's [5:43] their ability, I think it was Heiman and Zimmerman I looked at, they were talking about text to text, text to self, text to [5:51] and making those connections. You can [5:54] themes and values but I think that’s the first point I would make, it’s a bit waffly but it's really about changing a narrow assessment criteria that you could argue calls for a narrower curriculum. The tests have simply reduced primary English teaching to a naming of the parts culture with an unnecessary focus on terminology at the expense of meaning and reading. There! that’s my political bit.

**That’s OK. And Gove comes up a lot in this when I talk to teachers.**

Gove yes and his legacy so to speak, and Nick Gibb now, too. The government seem to do all they can to destroy education and suck the joy out of primary schools. They seem intent on forcing onto us stuff about language which seems so false, and they just have a very stale view of grammar teaching and testing. I cannot bear to even think about Nick Gibb and Gove. They’ve had such a damaging effect on my classroom.

**I’m sorry to hear that. It’s really sad. You mentioned earlier that the shift towards more traditional literature and different texts, do you think that that's been replicated also in the shift between more traditional grammar and more traditional grammar teaching then?**

It has, because if you're trying to source that kind of traditional grammar that you're talking about you're more likely to find it in those texts and it's open for some discussion. I would say on a personal level I don't actually dislike teaching SPAG itself, Spelling, Punctuation and Grammar, but I think it's quite interesting to unpack sentences and punctuation to [6:55] and it's not necessarily an enjoyable process but I can't say I've got a problem with the test in itself. What I dislike is that it is used purely as an assessment vehicle if you like, it's nothing, it creates meaningless bits of teaching where the focus is on naming bits and identifying bits of language rather than doing anything useful. The problem I have is that I think the impact on pedagogy on a practice is the fact that it's taught discretely and because it's taught discretely I've not seen, and colleagues that I've spoken to throughout the year and from my experience in Year 6, have all agreed that it is kind of unspoken consensus if you like, well not unspoken but you know this is soft data, this is me talking to colleagues, that really that because it's taught so discretely a lot of the skills that children pick up from teaching, the teaching of SPAG, don't transfer to their own writing and it doesn’t have that impact on their own writing. We had a moderation in Year 6 even though I was a Year 1 teacher [8:19] last academic year in the summer term was that I didn't see children using that until they were clearly prompted to do so by shoehorning semicolons into their writing in a very sort of prescriptive ticking of boxes sort of exercise because we knew we were going to be moderated.

**That's really interesting. And it's funny seeing Nick Gibbs' Tweets about how the tests in his views had a positive impact on students writing and yet all of the teachers that I've spoken to so far would very much echo what you've just said, that actually what the tests have done, because they're decontextualized grammar they seem to have promoted as you say, a kind of features, like a tick box exercise, a feature spotting exercise where actually the students writing quality hasn't improved at all it's just that because they're taught grammar in a decontextualized way.**

Yes. And I think the other issue we've had, and again I think I posted this before, is that what we’re doing is we're allowing grammar to lead the writing and what I feel very strongly and I think what Michael Rosen had said in that thread was that actually, the writing should lead the grammar. Look at your audience of purpose, immerse yourself in text, role play, talk, talk, talk and then decide okay, so what will we need for this? Writing instructions, I know, like as not, we're going to need some imperative verbs, bossy verbs as we call them in key stage 1. But I'm not going to leave with that, they’re going to find the necessity for that kind of grammar through exploration of who we're writing for and why we're writing for because what I noticed when we were moderating and when we were doing our emergency sort of surgeries and workshops with the children and putting them through it for the moderation, which sort of comes as a second wave of assessment after the SATS, called summer 2, was that they didn't always, they couldn't always tell me who they were writing for. And key to this, what actually makes them successful as writers and that I think is where success criteria comes in and agreeing and collaborating with [10:51] you know, co-constructing success criteria with the children, with learners, it's key to them being successful as writers. The danger there, is that the success criteria becomes a tick list of what they've included and that's where grammar comes in again. I mean grammar is not this sort of evil separate dark force, it's something that should be there to sort of signpost the writing for the reader.

**Of course, absolutely.**

But they're not seeing that because it's such a discrete process and time becomes so sort of [11:26] within Year 6 and you are teaching almost, going back to what I was saying about the literacy hour of these sort of blocks and teachers trying to do grammar starters which I don't have a problem with if it's relevant and contextual and if children can recognise that once they've identified why they're writing, who they're writing for and a sense of context and that's my issue with it and SPAG, when it came in, it just became an extra task to be timetabled and taught discretely. I tried to introduce, when we were planning sequences of SPAG rather than just looking at you know, websites for examples, [12:15] children to actually think with their creative writing books and actually look at what they've written and see where they could apply what they've been learning throughout the week as a kind of part of that process.

**So trying to embed it a bit more, concept-wise.**

Yes, and try to make connections been what they've been learning with SPAG. I remember one kid in Year 6, he's quite a handful but he's astute [12:42] and he said, we just [12:44] taught on our own, we never get taught this at the same time as when we're actually writing. His words, you know. The kids know that the only reason we focus so much on grammar are because of those tests. They’re not stupid.

**Yes, interesting.**

And I was saying, well 'why don't you feel like confident to take these ideas and look at this learning and apply it [13:00] writing?' He said [13:03] you know, this is something that we learn on its own and make sure they saw it as something they were going to be tested on and therefore psychologically they're seeing that as like a finite process and I'm seeing it as something that sort of ebbs and flows, something that is very, [13:24] connected with their writing.

**It’s a really interesting comment that, yes. So the kind of decontextualized nature of the tests there, they're having a potentially a negative impact on writing but also perhaps a negative impact on students’ perceptions of grammar and it feeling like it's this disconnected body of knowledge as such that's kept separate from reading and writing.**

Yes, it's like a room that they go into the come out again and as soon as the door shuts the knowledge and the experience contained within that room, it sort of stays there or something [14:02].

**It’s a really nice metaphor. And just another question about, we've spoken quite a lot about writing and the impact on writing, one of the things that the tests really emphasize is as well** **a decontextualized grammar, they emphasize the use of standard English and often it's quite evaluative language so circle this incorrect verb form for example or things like that. Have you noticed the impact at all on classroom practice or the way that you taught grammar as a result of that quite heavy emphasis on standard English at all in the curriculum more broadly but also in the tests as well?**

I think so in this version of the curriculum, yes. The use of standardized English and the way we test it seems to be emphasised much more than previous versions, I think it comes through the tests and in the curriculum for sure. Lots of stuff about formal language and things on test questions and in the curriculum about spoken language. And the teachers’ standards too, I don’t know if you know about them?

**Yes, I do. And what about the impact of that in classrooms? So the way that we test it and I'm thinking again perhaps if you have children in your class who use non-standard language and might recognise some of those structures in the tests that are then labelled as incorrect for example or your perceptions of standard English and those kinds of things really. Does that make sense?**

Yes. I think what it led to when I was in Year 6 was this sort of I suppose this culture of seeing that it was children would use the word wrong and I argued with them on this saying that actually you know, when you speak in the playground would you use these words? No, because, why? Well, because we're playing football, we haven't got time to use, you know sort of standardized English or words that aren't protracted or fronted adverbials. The fact is that we’re in a hurry. And I said, 'well, would that not work in your writing?' and the argument was, that yes it would but we know that there are words that, in their words, they would say, they're posh, they’re not words that we would use unless we’re sitting down and we have time to write. Whereas I was arguing that actually, you're incredibly fluent when you’re using non-standard English and the idea of non-standard English was quite a hard, it's quite a hard terminology to break down with children because the suggestion is through the testing that the way they're speaking is inherently wrong because there's a wrong or right answer to use in particular types of English. And of course the terminology keeps changing. One second it’s a conjunction the next it’s a connective. It does feel like the government are trying to trick teachers and catch us out. I mean, alright, verb endings when you're looking at the past tense [16:41] alright I get that but the idea that non-standard English, however sensitively we've been encouraged to handle it, I'm not sure we have been encouraged to handle it sensitively if you're saying that something is wrong or right. It’s a really silly and unhelpful way to think about language, I think anyway/

**Yes definitely.**

It's quite binary and it does suggest to them that it's wrong and they would use words like, it's wrong and I was trying to discourage them from saying, well actually the way we speak is wrong or right it's just has a particular context. But I don’t think the tests recognise that at all, it’s just you know, right or wrong, there you go, standard is right and non-standard is wrong.

**That's really interesting. So you as a teacher know that we don't really want to encourage talking about language in this way but because of the way it's framed in the tests and in the curriculum, it sounds like you're kind of pushed into doing that as such.**

Yes. And teaching them that and as I would always say to them, [17:29] say to Year 6's every year there's probably like 20 something wandering around if they care to remember it, and I wouldn't blame them if they don't, but might remember me saying, 'look, this is a game, all games have rules and this game ends when you leave school.' My headteacher believes that it's what he calls a flight path to success and we try tracking some children who've got sort of variable, [17:54] varied results in key stage 2 and track them through our local secondary school but my argument is that this narrow assessment criteria stays with the school, not the child, and I 100% believe that. I'm looking at my dissertation which I promise not to quote from but it's very much connected to that idea of it being, it’s a judgment school rather than the judgment being made on the child and the child's progress. I know of schools that actually tested children in what they call 'summer universities' in an East London borough where I work and they actually test them for their reading during the summer university using a Suffolk testing scheme which is the sort of comprehension test that I would have had in the late 70s early 80s when I was at secondary school so you know, it really does stay with the school. It really is [18:50] you know, I think Dave Hill referred to it as marketisation of primary schools at a time when we need to be more collegiate and working together. But in terms of non-standard, sorry I've gone off again.

**No, it's interesting.**

It's non-standard English however, I don't think there's been a lot of guidance frankly as to how we should handle this particularly in some of the more culturally diverse lingually diverse places I've worked in and always worked in really, and this idea that it almost feels like a class issue in some regards because to some children that’s the context that they, you know, that they operate in and that's how they use language and there's nothing wrong with that. I love the way English evolves but I don't think that's really addressed through this again, narrow system of assessment because language does evolve. [19:56] make it into the, is it the OED? The Oxford English Dictionary?

**Yes.**

Things make it in there that have evolved through TV programmes and popular culture and that's recognised by them but it doesn't appear to be recognised by the DfE.

**Absolutely.**

So it’s a very thorny issue because my way of saying it is like what we would sort of use when we're chatting to our friends, that kind of shorthand, and then what we would expect to hear someone perhaps reading in the News because [20:31] to the children, you know like, when you talk about taxing something in terms of stealing a few years ago now in London, someone in Yorkshire or someone living in the [20:42] of Cumbria wouldn't understand that so thinking about our audience and purpose we need to try to modify the way we will change the way we use language so we can reach all of those people and that they can understand it but there is a very very clear time and place for the kind of language that we use every day, [21:06] language isn't it.

**Yes absolutely. And there's so much good work to be done with language in schools and it's just so sad to see it reduced to this, as you say, binary decontextualized body of knowledge when actually that's a very artificial view of language that arguably doesn’t celebrate things like diversity that you mentioned earlier and regional variation. So I'm definitely not anti grammar at all but I do have some issues with the way that it's described and conceptualized within the curriculum and tests.**

No, I'm not, me neither. I'm not anti grammar I think it's very very important and I think it's fascinating as well but I'm not anti grammar any more than I'm anti assessment, I don't think there needs to be some way of knowing about children's progress and their attainment at the end of key stage before you pass them on, before they go through that transition. But it's barely looked at, I mean I've spoken to, you know we are allegedly learning without levels now but there are our colleagues in, certainly last year, that I was talking to in our local secondary feeder school, which I started out teaching at, I actually know the Head, because I started teaching there 20 years ago as a secondary art teacher so I know the school. They don't have that much of an understanding of it and they really just want a baseline figure because the amount of data that they're dealing with, to know where they are, what do we need to do and when we stream them it's not for life it will probably change by spring 2 in secondary school so you know, one does end up questioning the purpose of this. The only inevitable conclusion I can draw is, how has this been taught by the school? In other words, how much time and energy and resources are they willing to put into this and then there's a judgment made on [23:16] through published league tables. That might not have been the intention when it happened but it certainly has become the [23:24] result of it.

**Absolutely. Okay. Well, it's been so interesting hearing your thoughts and so much, very rich and interesting data. That's kind of the end of my questions as such but is there anything else that you wanted to mention that we haven't had chance to talk about, about the tests or field that you want to re-emphasize at all or do you feel like you've said all that needs to be said on it?**

I just think that [23:54] just concluding really is that I just think all [23:59] attentions within the classroom and within our practice you know, squaring the circle, national strategies for literacy, numeracy or English and Maths and that kind of pressure to focus on the basics, I know Ofsted have changed now to looking more, we were Ofsteded this year and the emphasis has shifted for what Amanda Spielman said about broader curriculum and there has been a change similar to the way we assess writers has changed but I would say there's still a lot of emphasis on grammar when we're assessing children through the teaching assessment framework [24:43]. Particularly for children who are working at the expected level and the implication therefore that those, the way we assess children when they're working at greater depth it's implied, I think that, and actually all of the understanding is in place. In other words, grammar is an expected outcome and then for children working at greater depth the risk-takers, as I think they are, are children that understand those rules in order to break them but I think again, that very conveniently bypasses what we've been talking about in terms of context.

**Yes definitely.**

Because those risk-takers, like or not, are going to use non-standard English, they're going to take risks with their tests and that's where I think the tension lies and when you teach as I said, discretely, as I know [25:39] teachers probably reflected and what you said that when it's taught discretely it's very rarely transferable. This idea of batch education and no connections being made, it's an outdated model of teaching and we all disagree with it and you know, [25:58] I don't know if anyone else has said this, did an indicative ballot as statutory testing at the end of key stage [26:06] and everyone disagrees with the way it's carried out and everyone I spoke to disagrees with the way the outcomes are used and no one is going to boycott it, no one is going to set themselves against a senior leadership team. And the senior leadership teams, in turn, are not willing to set themselves against what is essentially duff practice.

**Even though they know it's not right.**

Set by the DfE in their local boroughs.

**They have a lot of power, don't they?**

The stakes are too high, aren't they?

**Yes of course.**

If you do badly there's a chance you could end up being academized.

**Yes, sure. Well, a slightly bleak note to end on but really interesting and important.**

Yes I know, it is where we are but there's a lot of great practice going on out there, I have seen it and our school is very very very focused on [26:55] teaching and learning but I think schools feel that they have the freedom to do that when they get their outcomes right so that’s where it piles in and it's not getting them over the line at Year 6 I don't care what any Head says. It's actually hot housing them through this process which enables us to have the freedom to deliver the kind of curriculum that we all, in our heads and hearts believe 100% in but we can only do that if we are, this idea of being left alone.

**Yes, absolutely. Okay, well thank you.**

So not entirely bleak but it is about outcomes.

**Definitely. Well, it's been so interesting chatting to you and hearing your thoughts. Thank you so much for giving up half an hour of your summer break.**

That’s alright. Well, good luck with the research whatever you do. It would be nice to see where you go with it, be nice to, I don't know what you're planning to do but yes it would be great to see what your research looks like.

**Yes. So it will have a number of outputs, the main ones being academic articles and trying to challenge policy essentially that’s ultimately what I'm trying to do and get the government to listen to teachers and their voices to be heard so that's the ultimate aim so if it's okay I'll keep you on the list and any publications that do come out of it I'll be very happy to send you, email you those when they're done if that's okay.**

That would be great. It's lovely to engage in some research. I mean I do it on a very small [28:30] last summer, I'm kind of missing it a bit but I'm hoping to become a professional tutor next year at one of the Universities so it would be good to be around research and engage with it again at some point. So yes.

**Brilliant. Well, let's keep in touch.**

Look forward to seeing what you do.

**Great. Alright. Well, thanks so much for your time.**

No worries. Bye.

**Bye.**