**June**

**OK, if you could just briefly describe your current role in terms of what key stage you’re currently teaching and also how long you’ve been teaching as well is that okay?**

Yeah. I’m currently in Year 5, 2nd year of Year 5 and prior to that I was a Year 6 teacher. The reason I moved to Year 5 last year because I took part in the [00.27] project. But really I’m very much a Year 6 almost a 7 8 teacher really but that’s kind of my area of [00.38] My specialism passion is English so that’s the area in which I take a lead within upper key stage 2 and help people out with those over their [00.54] and for me English is a strength and it means then that I’m able to support the staff around me perhaps for whom Maths might be more of an interest or science might be more of an interest and that could be because you’re being a primary school where you’re Jack of all trades master of none. However there are people that do have passions and interests and we try to support each other that way. I’ve been teaching now for 12 years but I’m old, I’m an ancient, I didn’t start teaching until I was 37 about that age. And prior to that my husband was in the military and we moved all the time. So that’s my background.

**Great okay thanks June. So you’re currently teaching in a school that teaches well prepares children to take those tests is that correct?**

Yes.

**So moving on to the actual tests then, so your perceptions of the tests and also their impact on your teaching in general. The tests in their current form came into place around 2015-2016 and there were some slightly earlier versions before that. Could you just describe your general feelings about the tests?**

I was in Year 6 when they first came in and I myself was OK with them. I was very lucky I had an excellent education and I was well schooled in terms of understanding English and I had expert teaching all the way through my education so I felt really comfortable with grammar terms. On top of that I was somebody who had lived abroad and taught English as a foreign language to students and therefore in doing so I think it enriches massively your understanding of your own grammar because there’s so much which is inherently known for how we speak and we don’t teach grammar in English in the same way as in France and Italy where it’s very much a grammarian approach to teaching their language. So I had the advantage of being able to know the labels and know why they were being used, but my colleagues at the time had no idea and a lot of them had never come across any of this terminology so then they were light rabbits caught in headlights. I mean they were just terrified, absolutely terrified. I think my role very much was each morning my work colleague would come in and go, right just explain this one to me, and we’d have this 10 minute teach were we’d go through stuff, and she was brilliant, she always wanted to learn, but her schooling hadn’t prepared her for this. And you know, I didn’t mind, but I shouldn’t be doing that. It sounds bad perhaps but my job is to teach children, not other members of staff. I remember that a simple grammar test was given as an exemplar material before we actually was given the curriculum and of course we had the 2014 curriculum with an endless supply of grammar appendices and spelling appendices, not the actual, anything beyond transcription, nothing to do with composition, just a curriculum that was stuffed full of terms. So the students of that year, they were being tested on a curriculum which was the judgements were based on them having had 6 years of teaching and in fact they only had barely a year, they had two-thirds of a year before they suddenly had to be ready and prepped for this. And the format of the test is about not understanding, it is a feature spotting activity. I think the grammar teaching I end up doing is really quite artificial because it’s all about underlining features and using overly technical terms just for the sake of doing so. It turns into a box ticking exercise. I wonder is it doing anything useful? I don’t think so. It’s not teaching anything about language apart from the names of little tiny bits. And to be honest you could teach a monkey to pass it if you knew enough about grammar. And it did feel like you just drilled them with an edge of their life grammar terms. They had absolutely no notion about how to use them. No notion about why you would choose a certain past tense or whatever in their writing, it was simply a labelling activity and I think it hasn’t evolved much beyond that for many teachers. It’s changed the culture of our school so much. Those tests have just taken over.

**OK. So I’m sensing some quite critical perspectives on the tests then from yourself.**

Well personally I just think that accountability to schools is all about measures and this test is reduced simply to measure in the narrowest form in a black and white way what students can do with grammar. Not in any way it comes to utilisation or the effective enjoyment of grammar it’s simply can they name terms, and like I said you can teach a monkey to pass it. You could have a huge success rate in teaching grammar because you can just, it’s just about rote learning, it’s not about understanding, pass the test, if that’s what you choose to do.

**That’s really interesting. So since their introduction then to what extent have they actually affected or changed what happens in your classroom in terms of teaching grammar or teaching English more broadly. Would you say that the tests have had sort of powerful effect at all?**

Yeah well I can talk generally about what happens in our school and then talk more generally about my classroom because it is different.

**Yeah sure.**

I think within the school people are teaching it as a labelling activity, and an identifying activity, and a spot the difference activity. It’s about simple correction of so called errors in language. It does nothing for students’ language awareness or development.

**As the test is designed then really.**

Yes. And ultimately though the school is measured on that, it narrows the curriculum because people teach [06.53] test if your school accountability is based on so many percentage of children achieving a certain score. The writing in general, so not the grammar specifically but the writing in general is a little bit more, that’s pretty crazy as well but it’s a bit more ad hoc. And even within the writing if you look through all the particulars that are given there it’s all very much from a grammar perspective it’s grammar, grammar, grammar that’s been mentioned. Therefore as a teacher if you were coming into a classroom, as far as you were concerned that would be what matters in terms of writing. So you’re shoe horning in against these arbitrary success criteria [07.36] not thinking about right of voice or any of that stuff. And I think it’s swinging how teaching is taking place within schools. However I feel very anti just teaching grammar in isolation so for myself I teach it contextually and that’s one of the things that I bang on for all the staff that we’ve got to be teaching it in context, and I utilise a lot of text material I use poetry a lot in order to deal with things. We do a lot of creative writing and therefore when I’m discussing with students that they can alter their sentence and the impact on [08.18] that’s how I’m teaching grammar and I think I’m in isolation to be honest, I really don’t think that that’s a common way of doing it. You know, if you feel OK to do that, which I do, because I feel confident in grammar, sure, I can do that. But for so many of my colleagues they are just scared to death of those tests and so they revert back to teaching which I think they know is a load of crap.

**And why do you think that, because there’s so much research that argues quite explicitly.**

The teachers don’t read research. I’m in a really lucky position of having access to research because I’ve got the Exeter sign in through university that means I can keep up to date with all sorts of stuff, but I’m the only one in my school that does read research. So I’ll lead staff meetings or I’ll send articles to people, probably they get frustrated by the amount of stuff I give them, here’s a good read, try this one! But I don’t think for the most part teachers are influenced by the research that you know Debbie Myhill and Dominic Wyse and all those people who are pumping out stuff about grammar and Myra Barrs, that type of stuff teachers don’t have access to it.

**Yeah. And it’s such a shame isn’t it because there is so much research to suggest that decontextualised grammar doesn’t do anything for students writing.**

No. Nothing at all. And yet the curriculum demands that we do it that way. I mean, it is just a joke when you really sit back and consider that.

**Whereas contextualised grammar will have a positive impact.**

And I think I find it really frustrating when I was in year 6 that I would teach them all the stuff and then I’d go on to year 2 say and this is how we can use it but I never got that chance. All I got to do was teach them how to label stuff. I like a lot with the secondary school, one of our secondary schools locally, with their English staff and invite them in to come and see what we’re doing. And I’m saying you need to get them, they’ve got all this stuff, all this knowledge, and I know that you’ve written a paper about how the move to secondary school’s are really frustrated because the year 6’s are coming up with all these labels that they can attach to things but not a clue as to the whys and wherefores of it.

**That’s right yeah.**

And also the secondary teachers are saying they’re using terms that we don’t know which is quite worrying.

**Yeah I think there’s very little communication between the 2.**

I think key stage 3 is a bit of a no-man’s land. I think with the progress 8 that’s now in place and the pressure that there’s going to be with the secondary schools I think that’s going to make a big difference because suddenly they’ve got to react to, to be honest inflated schools because honestly we can get even the children who will be really low attaining can get [10.49]

**Right.**

That skews everything quite badly because it doesn’t match their writing or their capacity.

**Yeah sure. So you mentioned the word accountability. Do you think that one reason why teachers are teaching so much to the test and therefore very deep contextualised grammar is because of accountability. And in terms of what is that accountability within the school things like performance related pay or is it from a higher level up?**

No. It’s just when you’re in year 6 and you’re in year 2 the spotlight’s on you and obviously year 1 for the phonics as well. Spotlight’s on you for the kids to achieve. And although. And in year 6 teachers god knows we bang on it’s everybody’s responsibility.

**Yeah sure.**

Ultimately when you’re in year 6 if you don’t get good data with the school then the school then becomes vulnerable. And again year 2 I would suggest that a lot of year 6 teachers would look at the year 2 schools and go really.

**Yeah sure.**

They reckon they’re [11.53] you know the old days of being a 2B and a 2A and then we’d get them and suddenly realise that we had to get them up to a certain level in order that they made their progress otherwise we’d have the wrong colour on our chart. And then based on those children you’re really focusing on those children to make sure that they make the improvement. And it’s not good teaching, it’s about making sure that they are able to answer those testable qualities, that’s all they are, is testable binary qualities aren’t they.

**They are yeah it’s a very reductive view of what language is and it reduces language to a set of right and wrong answers which is not what language is at all.**

Exactly. And surely we should be teaching them the rule so that they know how to convert them and use them differently and play with them and make them tools that they can be invaluable with their writing but we don’t do that.

**Of course.**

I think that that’s insane amount of terminology that they’re expected to learn in year 6 it’s ridiculous.

**So terminology is another issue then quite clearly and that’s I suppose not just for the students but also you mentioned teacher’s own subject knowledge as well and feeling secure that they know this stuff.**

So the exemplar materials are quite useful but I could understand them all but still there’s a lot of teachers going well what and how does that look like so then I took all the grammar materials and I just wrote a grammar curriculum for the school. I took all the terms, broke them down and gave written examples of what that would look like so that they could actually go, I get it now. Even the interior to support materials on the intensity wasn’t enough for a lot of people.

**But your school’s lucky because they’ve got somebody in there who knows about grammar.**

Well lucky enough to, in terms of they’re lucky enough to be able to play the game. And they’re lucky enough to answer the prescriptions of the curriculum, that I’m able to do that side of things. But we’re still not lucky enough to do it in a way that’s meaningful [14.06] as writers.

**Because of the power of the test then presumably because of how it steers teachers towards doing things.**

Yeah. You’re right, that word power is so true. The tests are incredibly powerful. Incredibly so.

**The government claim that because the test results are increasing year on year the government claim that that means that writing quality has improved.**

Which is nonsense.

**And you mentioned before the idea that writing quality now it forces teachers to just shoehorn terms in. Could you talk a little bit more about that in terms of grammar teaching and what might happen as a result in terms of pedagogy?**

So in terms of more general writing rather than specifically complication of the SPAG tested element.

**Yeah. I’m just going back to the word that you used before, the shoehorning of grammatical terms into writing. I’m just interested to know a little bit more about why you think that happens and is that as a result of curriculum change or the tests or something else perhaps?**

The joy that is the writing expectations. So I’m an LA moderator as well so I’m quite well versed in what to look for in writing too. And the writing now, one classic comment from, this is [15.24] I belong Cheltenham Festival’s Reading Teachers reading pupils and we were discussing. We had 2 books last year, one was a Ross McKenzie book [15.40] and the 2nd was Running on Empty [15.41]. Running on Empty is written from a child’s perspective and the writers voice for that child is perfect. You cannot read that book without thinking my god they have captured this child perfectly.

**Yeah sure.**

And then the [15.59] is full of ambitious language [16.02] complex sentence structures. And the discussion from a number of year 6 teachers was there’s another use running on empty in a year 6 class

**Right interesting.**

Teaching good writing. And I would say but no it’s brilliant writing because in its simplistic form it had captured that child’s voice brilliantly and teachers opinions of what good writers are if they’re not necessarily confident writers themselves is what’s given in the greater depth scenario that you’ve got with the. And there’s a massive grammar component in the exemplar materials that the FBA have given in order to support our ability to make judgements. Because the actual standards themselves are narrow limited and so they’ve packed it out with exemplar materials and teachers are just trying to make sure that their children are matching those [16.58] materials and therefore fronted adverbials are used in abundance whether the writing merits it or not. And teacher would assume that that was a great piece of writing because of the. So all of these elements are skewing the type of writing that students produce.

**You’re about the 13th teacher that I’ve spoken to as part of these interviews, and the message has been very similar from every teacher. And every time I hear teachers tell me this story I just despair.**

Your heart sinks.

**It does yeah because it seems to have a real impact on what teachers see their job as. And how the tests and the writing moderation has perhaps reduced teachers into doing things that they don’t believe in.**

I’m really lucky in my school that I’ve got a headteacher who totally backs my capacity [18.03] to teach and doesn’t restrict me. And I think looking at the awful stuff on Twitter that you see teachers that have regimes that they’re having to work under, I think that for a lot of teachers it must be totally misery.

**Yeah of course. It’s a real attack on teachers professional identity and their values as teachers.**

I think what’s worse as well is that actually it’s deskilling teachers massively so the creative writing and stuff that I do with my guys, my writing on side, my creative journals, they almost wet themselves when they come into my class because they say you mean we can write about what we want, and they don’t have that chance to do that because they’ve been so controlled by teachers about subject matter about what needs to go into a piece of writing, about how it should sound. There’s always this speed march towards uniformity. The kids are no longer. Their voice is no longer valued and therefore with the lack of reading experience that they have because they are still little and they you know, you’re trying to get them off well [19.10] trying get them off reading [19.11] find pleasure in reading. Their reading matter is so limited, but they don’t have the where with all to play around with stuff and therefore they do end up doing [19.23] piece of writing that’s been handed to them.

**Of course. And just one more question if that’s okay June. It’s a question about standard English in the tests. One thing that I’ve been looking at with the test questions is that they really emphasise the use of standard English.**

Entirely.

**Do you have any perceptions of that at all in terms of your judgements. Is that have an effect at all on pedagogy this kind of emphasis on standard English?**

I think within the context, yes. I teach in Cheltenham, so I think in terms of regional variations of language that’s used perhaps in the school I don’t think that it’s as dissimilar as it might be for other cohorts. So I imagine that we’re slightly different. A lot of parents are middle class and probably would be using a standard English much more than perhaps if you were interviewing someone from Rochdale or something. That sounds really judgemental but you know what I mean.

**I know what you mean yeah.**

So for us the standard English form isn’t quite so screamy. But I would imagine if I were teaching someone that had rich regional language then I would be tearing my hair out the fact that that would be devalued and not correct. Because that’s the language that’s evolved with the nature and the world around them in response to that and that suddenly is deemed as wrong. And all of that rich regional variation that we have in our country is somehow being devalued because of it. But like I say within my particular cohort that’s not, just by the very nature of the group.

**Of where you are yeah.**

Of where I am.

**Of course. It’s such a shame isn’t it to see very evaluative words like right or wrong or circle the incorrect verb form, where actually a lot of children speak in regional dialects that verb form is completely.**

That’s their family voice. And that’s been. An international call has been made on that. And I understand, because we talk to them about formal informal writing you can teach it as a formal way of expressing ourselves, and an informal way of expressing yourself but there’s not right and wrong.

**Yeah sure completely agree. Okay well I think that it’s been so fascinating to hear your thoughts and we could talk a lot longer but I’ll let you get back to your Wednesday evening. Just to finish off was there anything that you would like to comment on that you haven’t had chance to do so, or anything that you would like to revisit or clarify or change anything that you’ve said at all?**

No I think I’ve been able to express. I do feel quite strongly about it and I do feel frustrated by it. I am, like I said I’m in the really lucky position of a headteacher who just trusts me to get on, so I don’t have any restrictions in how I teach. In contrast though when I was on the project and the [22.58] project we all had 2 [23.01] weekends together. A lot of teachers met, it was [23.05] from the north west mostly so Manchester going through to Liverpool. And a lot of teachers there were heavily, heavily restricted in every way that you would want not to be.

**Oh right interesting.**

Within their school. I appreciate that I’m in a really, really lucky position.

**Yeah sure.**

And even I, I just relegate what is out there as a misunderstanding about what is good. But I imagine that I’m able to reach pretty much how I want to teach. There are so many teachers out there for whom that’s not the case.

**Great. Well I hope it continues for you.**

We’re lucky.

**Great.**

Do you want my email address and then I can then get people to.

**Oh yeah that would be great if you don’t mind.**

Shall I do the school one and then it’s nice and formal?

**Yeah that will be perfect.**

So it’s [EMAIL ADDRESS]. And if for any reason that bounces back because it’s the worst possible address then just message me on Twitter and then I’ll send it to you directly then.

**I’ve written it down but yeah I’ll send it you on Twitter if not okay. Great well thank you June. Just a final reminder that you are free to withdraw at any point. Everything’s anonymised and if you want to see a copy of this transcript of the interview then I’m very happy to send you that, also very happy to send you any copies of academic publications which.**

I’d be really interested in that side of things. I trust that you’re not going to change my words into a progovernment.

**Don’t worry about that.**

But I’d be really interested yes [25.25] stuff you’ve done in UKLA.

**Yeah great.**

I wonder though how soon my extra thing’s going to dry up [25.35] I’m hoping through the alumni thing I might still be able to.

**Yeah it’s important to have that connection I think.**

I have learnt so much in the work that I’ve done.

**I bet yeah. And working with Debbie and Teresa, all fantastic people.**

Extra special at the moment [25.55] to get to work with those guys. But yes I’d be really interested in papers and things like that, that would be great. And if you do need any further information or whatever then please feel free to buzz me.

**Fab thanks so much June. Well have a nice evening.**

Not at all. And I’ll try and recruit some people.

**Great. I’ll send you the link right now.**

Super.

**Fab.**

Thank you very much.

**Thanks June nice to speak to you.**

Thank you.

**Bye-bye.**

Bye-bye.