**Max**

**Just to start off with some demographics. I believe I’m right in thinking that you’re a head teacher, is that right?**

Yes.

**Can I ask how long you’ve been a head teacher for Max?**

I started in 2007 so 12 years.

**So you’ve been a head teacher since the tests were introduced then so you’ve seen how things have changed as a result of the introduction of the tests. Have you ever taught the content of the tests at all?**

Not hugely so before, let me think, the first 8 years of my headship I was in infant schools and they hadn’t inflicted such things upon the children at that point. I was just back [01:15] phonic tests so in the last 4 years I’ve been in a primary school. I’ve done bits of cover teaching maybe but not actually; I haven’t planned a whole curriculum around it and what have you.

**The tests came into place around 2015/2016 at least in their current format although the older versions are a little bit earlier than that; can I just ask then, what’s your general feeling about those tests in terms of how you feel about them in terms of their worth or indeed their worthlessness? I’m trying not to put any bias into these questions here. And also, in terms of how you feel that they’ve affected or changed perhaps what happens in your school. Does that make sense?**

Yes. So in terms of their worth or their worthlessness, I just think they are an abomination, I think they’re absolutely terrible but the things that they’re expecting children of that age to understand, it’s beyond what we had to do, what I had to do when I was doing my ‘O’ Levels and I [02:49] and I went on to get a degree and all the rest of it but I think there’s not a lot of coordinating in junction and [02:59] but I didn’t need to know that that is a called a coordinated conjunction or that’s a subjunctive whatever to do it and I think that is incredibly damaging to children and they are being taught all of this so-called knowledge by teachers who are excellent teachers but it’s stuff that they don’t even have because they didn’t get taught it when they were at school. Why are we imposing it on 11-year olds? I think it’s completely and it’s not even needed. That’s my main view because my biggest issue around them is that I think because they’re very measurable in how did you get a pink [03:49] you get a very easy number. I think it’s very attractive to teachers to measure schools and progress and I think for me and lots of my colleagues I’m sure and certainly my teachers, the biggest issue about raising standards in our school isn’t about children’s understanding and use of grammar and all those phrases and terms; it’s actually basic understanding and exposure to English language because when I got to my school, the current school I’m in in 2015, half of my children in Year 6 didn’t know what the word ‘slope’ meant and that’s not because they had English as an additional language, like British lived on the estate all their lives and the estate’s on a hill and they didn’t know what the word ‘slope’ meant. That’s more critical for their understanding than knowing subordinate and conjunction. I feel the value of the test is just, there is no value to them. That’s my best [04:58].

**I share your view but I’m trying to get a range of opinions so I’ve had some views from teachers that would absolutely agree with you.**

I know there’s some that disagree, I know there was.

**Of course, as is always the case with these things. Do your colleagues tend to feel the same way as you then, teachers that work in your school?**

Largely, yes, yes. They do it because they have to; they know that they have to get to this curriculum and that they’re going to be assessed on it and it’s all going to be published data but they know that there’s a lot more value in teaching hard, doing hard quality literature with them, lots of pleasure of reading and developing their grammar skills actually through that, not having to know the terms, every single word, every single bit of punctuation and clauses and what have you.

**Are your teachers still finding time to do that more meaningful work with grammar or have the tests had such an effect that they’ve narrowed the curriculum so that that good stuff gets pushed out then?**

I think we’ve shifted. When I first got to school, there was a very rigid, because those tests exist, we have to do 40 minutes of pure grammar every day and it was often out of context and actually as time went on, I just said we need to actually not be scared by the fact that this is a test and I think we just, we need to, we can’t completely ignore it because there’s also something to beat you up with, they like their sticks, up in Central Government, but next time get more of the rich stock coming through. So there still is some direct grammar teaching and some of it is a bit on the dry side but we’re trying more to incorporate it in some of the literacy lessons that are around interesting and exciting text and bringing it in more through that way which is as it should be really. But that has been such a monumental effort, to try and steer teachers away from boring and dry grammar lessons which remind me of what 1950s teaching must have been like you know.

**Absolutely, yes.**

I think there’s been, there’s still an impact on the quality of the curriculum for me and it’s less than it was because we’ve just decided that we’re pushing back now.

**It’s just fascinating hear you talk because you’ve obviously got some really good sensible views about meaningful grammar teaching as have your colleagues it sounds like but to me, the power of the Curriculum and the tests, maybe not so much anymore now that you decided to resist that a little bit but the power of the tests seems to have a real hold over pedagogies so what teachers do in their classroom.**

Completely, yes.

**Would you say that that’s true? Is that something that your teachers report then?**

I think everybody feels it and I think probably because it comes from top down because we get the pressure put on us around results and published results, forced academisation, nobody wants that and so when you’re a school that’s in struggling circumstances such as we were, we still are to a degree but are coming out of it, you’ve kind of, you’ve sort of got to play the game a little bit to keep them off your back and you’ve got to get your numbers to a certain level before you can then be confident and say ‘Do you know what? I’m going to push back against this.’ Now we’ve got to this level, we can actually push back and do a bit more of what we want to do but up until the point when I first got there, we had 20% combined which is really, really, really low. You kind of have to jump through quite a lot of hoops in those initial phases and look like you’re doing what they want you to do but it’s horrible, it’s a horrible thing to do.

**It must be, I mean as a head teacher especially, how do you navigate that then, the legalities of having to teach the Curriculum and the top down pressures to teach the Curriculum? How do you begin to make sense of that as a professional teacher with a professional body of staff, asking them to do something that you don’t necessarily believe in? It must be really difficult for you to deal with that.**

Well, I mean it is but I think the way that I’ve always had to do it is I’ve just had to be honest and so, I’m honest with myself, I’m honest with the staff, I’m honest with the children actually as well and the parents and they all say actually how well you know this might not be that important; it’s more important to me that you really love that book. But at the moment, because we’ll have to do these tests, we’re just going to get on with it and I just, that’s what I say to them because I couldn’t pretend to be the government state: you must do this, it’s dreadfully important. I do believe it’s the most important thing that children leave the school with because [10:54]. I’ve just got to be honest and I’ve got a team of teachers who, they are brilliant and they feel the same; they wish they didn’t have to teach it to the depths that they do but because we have to, we’re trying just to find ways to do it in the best ways that we can now and still have that rich curriculum in all the other areas and not get too bogged down with it at all.

**I guess you just can’t let yourself because you would.**

You’d go mad.

**Well exactly. What are you meant to do? There’s always pressures from Government when you’re a teacher, isn’t there?**

Yes.

**But the tests do seem like an especially unfair one. A lot of the teachers that I’ve spoken to talk about some of the things that you’ve mentioned so the unnecessary use of lots of terminology for example but also the impacts that, the negative impact that the tests might be having on writing in the sense that now writing seems to be just a jumping through the hoops exercise and it’s about just filling your writing with features. Is that something that you’ve seen in your school as well?**

Again, because they can lock onto something because they think that’s a teacher pleaser one, I’ll get that one in there and it becomes quite stilted and one of the things that I found really quite shocking the first test, the 2016, when we had the writing session then and we have to [12:33] coming out of Year 6 and I was, although our results were bad, I was talking of [12:43] this writing is appalling. It read really badly and I’ve seen better from my Year 2 and actually the moderator said ‘No, this actually meets standard because look, tick they’ve got this phrase, tick they’ve got that, tick they’ve got that, that child is working at standard’ and actually the child couldn’t write a fluent piece of writing, not even a paragraph long but because they’d gone tick, tick, tick, they were being passed off as writing at standard. That’s not right. I just find it quite shocking that intelligent people who know what good writing looks like and sounds like when you read it out loud ignore everything that they know and look at a tick list and say because it fits this tick list, that’s a decent piece of writing and it isn’t.

**It’s just madness isn’t it? Especially when Nick Gibb and the Government use the tests as a way of saying, suggesting that literacy rates have developed, are getting better.**

Oh don’t!

**I speak to teachers like you and they just say ‘Well no, they’ve not. They’re just against their very artificial measures they have but what we know about writing, that’s not the case.’**

Completely and the best thing that happened was when they messed up the KS1 administration years ago and since then they’ve made it optional to do them at KS1 so we just don’t bother.

**I don’t blame you.**

The reading test I do for KS1 is [14:28] if you ever get to look at that, oh no! It’s terrible. It’s really, really bringing all this in, just squashed the actual flow for a lot of children.

**One thing that the tests and indeed the Curriculum more broadly really emphasises and in things like the teacher standards as well is the use of standard English. Is that something, the kind of emphasis on standard English in the Curriculum and on the tests and in the teacher standards, is that something that’s had an impact at all on your school would you say in terms of pedagogies or talking or policies about standard English?**

Not massively. We’d be saying to our staff because we’ve got to be the best role models for reading and writing, we want the children to have good role models with English but we do still have nearly, most of our support staff will say ‘Was you’ and what have you, incorrect verb use and all the rest of it and we’ve actually got one of our teachers and she’s very conscious of it and she does find it very difficult and she’s really got to second guess herself every time because she started tying herself in knots. And in an ideal world, it wouldn’t be a problem for her but do you know? In every other element she’s such an amazing teacher, why would I say I’m not going to employ you? She’s absolutely fabulous so she’s staying with us. Now I know that there may well be an OFSTED inspector who comes in and says ‘You’re not giving the children a good enough quality of education because this teacher can’t speak standard English’. I’ll fight that fight when it gets there.

**It’s a difficult one to deal with that isn’t it?**

It’s a tricky one to navigate in that sense but I think we just have to support people if they need the development and do the best that we can.

**Yes, sure. That is a very difficult one to deal with. I’m having a similar issue with my trainee teachers on the PGCE course that I’m teaching at the moment, just been looking at the teacher standards; loads of them speak with local London accents and are not used to standard English, I think they’re really worried about it because I think they feel that they’re going to be picked up on it and they’re going to be brilliant teachers and for me their accent and their dialect has no bearing whatsoever on the quality of their teaching. It’s really difficult. Do your students use non-standard English presumably as well? I’m looking at the area code, it’s a London number, is that right?**

Yes, I’m in Beckenham, my school is part of Lewisham.

**And presumably those students are also using local variation in their language.**

Oh yes.

**But the tests demand a knowledge of standard English.**

Yes.

**Has there been any issues at all with having to speak to students about standard English at all or is that not really something that’s come up?**

I mean, as part of the teaching, that’s what we say. We all express ourselves differently; we’ve all got different accents, we’ve got different dialects, we’ve got different but the standard English is that we don’t say ‘she done’, we say ‘she did’ and that’s part of it that comes up in the test. And again, for our children, because of their exposure, for some of them it’s easier than others but the ones that tend to grasp it are the ones that have got the love of reading because the more that you’re reading it, you’re more likely to get it. I think [19:08] we didn’t only have that model in school but we also have it on television as well because you only used to hear standard English on television didn’t you but now, a lot of that has gone for our kids so their exposure is coming from us and it’s coming from the books more than anything else. The issue with the tests is that they only permit one way of speaking and one way of using language. So I do think that they impose a judgement on my students who speak non-standard English.

**Thank you. I could go on and on but I think I’m getting a fairly good sense of your feelings about the tests and the kind of power that they have. I think we’ll draw it to a close but is there anything else that you’d like to comment on about the tests or about the Curriculum in terms of grammar that you haven’t had a chance to do so yet that you want to speak about or indeed anything that you want to clarify at all?**

I think I’ve probably said everything that I need to say and I think everything that I’m saying about the grammar I would equally say applies to phonics and the way that that’s used. I always draw a massive circle for my parents and I do a tiny, tiny little circle and I say phonics is this and actually literacy is that big and phonics can be a bit more important to some children than others but actually, everything else is really; the talking and the [20:46] and the picking at your language acquisition and loving your books.

**Real reading.**

It’s not just about sounding out the words. Yes, and again, it’s exactly the same feelings that I have for [21:04].

**There’s definitely some interesting contact points between grammar and phonics and some similar criticisms and indeed a lot of the teachers that have issues with the grammar tests have issues with the phonics test.**

Yes, yes, completely.

**I won’t ask anything else about phonics. I’ll try and give you a break on your Tuesday evening.**

No worries.

**Thank you so much Max, it’s just been fascinating talking to you. Thank you so much for giving me your insight.**