**Amy**

**OK so just to start then, can I just ask what your general perceptions of those tests are in terms of the effects and impacts that you see them having on schools? How powerful are they as such?**

Well I think the tests are incredibly high pressure. They’re creating pressure cookers from schools. And I think they impose and change the way that people teach, in not very good ways, that’s for sure. I’ve seen that and heard about that. The grammar tests are particularly bad I think because no one seems to know why they’re there and what kind of knowledge they’re even testing. The main priority of those tests, without a doubt, is to generate data so the government can monitor and impose what kind of things happen in schools, and to create schools where tests and exams are the normal everyday practice. I think they are ruining the kind of education children are getting. Sorry, I ranted there a bit, but you know!

**OK thanks Amy. No problem. That’s really interesting and I’ll certainly come back to some of those issues throughout this interview. So what I’m doing at the moment then is collecting a very wide range of data including interviews with teachers, interviews with policy makers, interviews with people like yourself and activist groups that are trying to be critical and try and resist some of the tests and what the government are trying to do in order to try and thread everything together. And ultimately what that will lead to is I hope will be things like policy change but also. So, could you just** **outline a little bit about your work with Save Our Schools, your involvement in it and I suppose the aims of the group and what triggered your work with that group.**

Yes [03.44] very clear what triggered my work and that was an online SATs test [03.57] Facebook or something by the Guardian you know it was a link from a Guardian just try your hand at [04.04] this is probably going back 3 years now 2016 and I was absolutely appalled. I’m an award-winning writer. I’ve spent the last 20 odd years of my life in journalism and columns and I could not believe the absolute pile of tripe that my daughters have been taught since the word go, whether it’s for phonics or for grammar or whatever. I remember my daughter when she was 5, I’ve got twins, they’re 10 years old. When Leoni was 5, they got quite [04.46] one day and she was going mummy, mummy we’ve learned something today it’s called die, it’s called die, and then she started to get really upset because she couldn’t remember the technical term for it. And she said it’s when 2 cells make 1 cell. I said oh is it a dicthon and she said no it’s not a dicthon, what’s it called. And she was having a total meltdown at this stage. I finally found out, I don’t know when but some time later and she’d been talking about diagraphs. Now I’d never ever heard of them. At that point I was in my 40s, having had a very successful career in communication and journalism. So I was unable on the day she was having her meltdown to say none of this matters.

**Yes sure.**

Don’t worry about any of it. I didn’t know what she was getting so upset about. So that kicked in age 5. By age 7 they’re expected to know all these ridiculous grammatical things that are of no use whatsoever to them, because all they do is just spend hours hunting for them in sentences and then trying to cram them into writing. We were walking along the seafront probably a couple of years ago, and Leoni [06.04] a sort of misty rain falling over the sea and she said something like, oh look, the grey [06.14] of the falling rain [06.21]. And it was sort of like how many adjectives can you get into one sentence [06.28] was I’m using 20 adjectives where 1 interesting word will do. It’s all absolute nonsense. So anyway, I took this test, I was appalled. I shared it with a few people who were equally appalled. And then found out about this [06.49] kids’ day of action strike. So I went on that and took my girls out of school, and what really shook me was that there were teachers there on this day of action who would not even say they were teachers, let alone why they were there. They were so scared. And this is what you know I think part of the problem is. I think you’ve got a whole community of teachers now who really fundamentally disagree with how things are tested, who totally disagree with everything they’re being made to do by government but feel utterly disempowered to do anything about it.

**That’s really interesting.**

I was very open with the form teacher and head teacher about taking the girls out of school and why I was doing it. That then triggered a letter from our head to everybody in school saying okay Year 2 parents if you want to join this school strike will not be hammered with an unauthorised absence, I give permission for you to do that. You may be surprised to hear that the school views are more closely aligned [07.59] however moving forward I’d much prefer it if parents and school work together [08.08] and went and had a meeting with them. And basically, that was the start of Save Our Schools. So we originally were campaigning to get rid of SATs, to get rid of the ridiculous bad curriculum. I mean the maths is so challenging. One of my daughters handles it and the other doesn’t. I don’t really have a problem with that, provided they’re getting the basic grounding, stretch the more able children as much as possible, and maths is a beautiful, creative, problem solving subject. It’s useful in so many ways that go way beyond that.

**Of course.**

Language should be the same and it’s been reduced to a set of yes and no answers. Children have to spend time trying to work out what the government want to think is either right or wrong in language, and I mean, come on, that is just so reductive and so far removed from what linguists – people like you – would want the study of language to be about.

**Yes absolutely.**

Anyway, after several meetings at which the head said right you need to get local politicians onboard and then we can take this to a bigger group of head teachers. And we did all of that. So we had Caroline Lucas onboard, Peter Kyle not the at that time incumbent Tory MP who no-one ever saw sight nor sound of you know.

**Yes.**

He was one of those absent MPs who would just come in for a quick photo opportunity. But then what became very apparent [09.44] was that actually while head teachers are against the current [09.50] system, what their biggest issue by miles was funding.

**Right okay.**

So the head teachers asked us to launch the Save Our Schools campaign on the subject of funding.

**Okay.**

With the promise that further down the line they would then support us as we moved into [10.12] testing, and [10.15] actually.

**Okay.**

So you have to understand Ian that I was coming at this absolutely from a parent. I’ve campaigned for Amnesty International; I’ve campaigned for Homeless. I have got some campaigning experience but very much in a personal capacity. And what we ended up doing was launching a highly visible or highly successful campaign that went national. So we now have Save Our Schools groups in maybe 18-20 locations around the country.

**Right okay I didn’t realise that.**

Yes so Devon, Sheffield, Birmingham has a massive Save Our Schools group now, founded by my brother and a colleague of his.

**And have you had any funding for it?**

We did crowd funding. So the 1st thing we did was pay for 70 banners to go up on every single school in Brighton & Hove, every single school put one up saying how much, saying funding cut by £14m. That represents an average of £196,000 per school. And some of those banners are still up actually, looking very raggedy.

**Yes I’m sure.**

So we had our launch event in I think it was April 2017. That took several meetings to gather together to form a plan. The night before our launch we presented to about 40 head teachers in Brighton and they were all completely behind us. And then campaigned very successfully on school funding for the last couple of years and then since the beginning of this year we’ve moved absolutely into the high stakes testing territory.

**Yes sure okay.**

So the 1st thing we did on a national level was to set up something called The Big Fat Sit In, with a sister campaigning group that I’m also a founder member of, called More Than a School.

**Yes, I’ve spoken to somebody from More than a School. I think it was them that put me in touch with you actually.**

Was it Jemma Moss at UCL?

**No, it wasn’t Jemma at UCL it was somebody, although Jemma is obviously a colleague of mine. It was Madelaine.**

Yes. So I actually now have ended up totally and advertently running the More Than a School campaign in a professional capacity.

**Oh, wow okay.**

You need to know that. So I am actually paid for the work that we do. And you might be interested to look at a film that we produced and brought out on the same day as [13.17] a week later it’s had 600,000 views, it’s gone viral. And another 600,000 users many of those have been headteachers showing them to an entire school. So you can probably times that amount by at least 10-20. So yes, well that’s our work. I conceived that and then got a director and cameraman and put that together.

**OK.**

You can actually count 600,000 it’s probably had 10 times that. Some headteachers have shown it to an entire of 1000 pupils.

**Of course, Yes.**

Many have shown it to all their Year 6 pupils. So it’s had millions of views basically in terms of numbers of pairs of eyeballs. So it’s a message that’s well and truly struck a chord with the nation.

**Yes. And this might sound like perhaps an obvious question, but why do you think it’s had such that impact with teachers?**

Because I think we’re telling the truth in a way that touches the heart as well as the mind. I think that all those teachers will have. You know if you think over a 3rd of pupils fail their SATs, and I know it’s dressed up as not reaching expectations because somehow that sounds a million times better. But what you’re basically doing is packing over a 3rd of English school children off to the biggest transition they’ll go through at this age, i.e. to secondary school with a great big failure label on their forehead. What a brilliantly effective way of turning a 3rd of the young population off learning for life.

**Absolutely.**

It’s a crime. Schools have been warped into exam factories. I know that sounds like an exaggeration and I know teachers are trying to do they best they can to resist that, but the government pile on more and more tests all the time. And OK, you might think, well some tests are needed, OK, fine, but if you’re going to test children, at least make sure the test has a purpose. The grammar tests just don’t do that, because they just test a narrow and artificial version of language. And teachers are just reduced to empty shells who have to reproduce this nonsense.

**Yes. And you mentioned before that up until this point you feel that teachers have felt quite disempowered.**

Yes.

**Why do you think that is? Why do you think there’s that feeling that they perhaps?**

Well haven’t you seen what happens to any headteacher who sticks their head above the parapet [15.40] you know I’m not going to enforce it; they get hounded at the very least by Ofsted, and at the very worst they get the sack. So legally they are bound by law to implement a system that they fundamentally disagree with.

**It’s amazing that much control isn’t it.**

And the only other [16.05] is a disaster on it. It is a system of punishments and what I would call very punitive surveillance. From Ofsted, from the local authority you know.

**Again, this might seem like an obvious question but in terms of the impacts that the tests have had, you talked about your daughter being upset, you’ve talked about the effect the kind of narrowing of the curriculum. In what other ways would you say that the tests have had an impact on schools, either in terms of things that you’ve noticed what you think might be happening in the classroom, or from things like teacher motivation.**

Well there’s a massive recruitment crisis. Teachers no longer have a. There’s no room for their vocational calling. They’re just players in the system that is reducing our kids to data point. So as you rightly said earlier the government can claim that 90% of kids are taught in Good or Outstanding schools.

**As I mentioned the research, I’m doing is particularly focused on the grammar tests and you mentioned before about language and how those tests reduce language to a set of right and wrong answers, which is a very problematic and reductive way of thinking about what language is.**

Yes, it is.

**Have you seen evidence of this then? I suppose my question is around thinking in particular about the SPAG tests in terms of.**

Yes, I mean my whole concern with SPAG is it’s reducing a beautiful living language to a set of yes and no answers. It will knock the stuffing out of kids who naturally just want to creatively express themselves, by god if they haven’t got [18.21] a couple of adverbs and can support preposition at [18.27] then they’re not going to get good scores.

**Sure.**

I mean to me any age 10 child currently managing to put together lovely pieces of prose or poetry and doing that in spite of the education they’re receiving not because of it, well there’s something very wrong with that.

**Absolutely Yes.**

And I also have a massive problem with phonics if I’m honest, which I think is all part of the same thing, it’s all part of being able to [18.57] right or wrong.

**Yes definitely.**

And it’s destroyed that notion of love of reading. By the time I was 10 I was devouring books. I just loved reading. And every child should have that opportunity to develop a love of reading. But if you’ve sat there having to pronounce nonsense words and being wronged for not being able to pronounce the word [19.22] or something. And decontextualized grammar will do nothing for literacy ability it’ll teach you about how to spot a preposition phrase but it won’t increase your literacy ability. And the government have consistently given the message that the tests increase and improve literacy rates, whereas actually that’s not the case at all.

**There’s actually some evidence to suggest that they’re damaging literacy rates and as you say reading for pleasure and.**

Absolutely. Both children passed. […]

**I suppose what I’d like to ask about now is whether you’ve had I suppose the kind of responses that you’ve had from the brilliant work that you’re doing. And obviously it’s been very supported by teachers and schools and the video for example. Have you had much response from the Department for Education or from policy makers at all?**

Yes, it’s quite entertaining. I mean they have been utterly silent actually since our film came out. But generally, whenever there’s something newsworthy and we make a statement [21.11] now they come out with [21.17] or their statistics which they’re being told [21.20] they’re being told off for how [21.23] they [21.24] you know 85% of kids are taught in Good or Outstanding schools. To which our response is well if you’re measuring the school of how many kids it can cram for 6 months so that they get a pass in their SPAG and what have you then you know. We’ve got a school at the moment, Moorscombe which operates in the most deprived area of Brighton & Hove that had such poor SATs results that they’ve now been. Ofsted came in in some way, then they had to become an Academy, we had hundreds and hundreds of parents, governors, local authority people, headteachers marching through the streets of Brighton saying Hands Off you know. So the end game of all of this is. You know let’s not forget the other motive here, it’s not just about the damage being done to the children in the classroom it’s the damage being done to the overall infrastructure of the state education system.

**Absolutely.**

Now Moorscombe has lovely playing fields but what’s going to happen to them, they’ll be sold off to developers before you can blink an eye.

**Absolutely. I think that’s a really important point that the tests are just one part of a system in place.**

In an ideologically driven system. And the agenda is one of academisation, due to privatisation, it’s a scandal. It’s a national disgrace and a national scandal.

**Again, thinking about your work and the way that academic research has been interested in it. Have you had much support from academics particularly I’m thinking about linguists at all, in openly being critical of the tests and the view of language for example?**

I mean obviously people like Jemma are involved. We do have educational experts on the More Than A Score side of things. With Save Our Schools we’re very much a parent-led campaign.

**I was at the UK Literacy Conference at the weekend and More Than A Score had a really good booklet about the dangers of baseline testing which is another thing that’s going to be introduced in the next. You know there’s the pilot that’s being run at the moment.**

Well they’re piloting it now and our big message that we’ll be pushing out. Probably this is off the record Ian, [DATA REMOVED]. The NAHT is saying everyone do the pilot and then criticise it. But what we’re saying is no don’t even do it. If enough schools don’t do it, they haven’t got a leg to stand on. So we are hoping to disrupt [24.53] never happens. That’s our campaign aim, that is our top campaign aim through 2019-2020.

**That sounds really sensible Yes okay.**

Because you know SATs have been in place for 30 years, they’re so ingrained. Young teachers coming through that can’t conceive of a world without SATs.

**Yes definitely.**

They’ve all been indoctrinated whereas baseline, and the times table test actually are ripe for just being so disruptive that they never get off the ground.

**Yes absolutely definitely. Okay well that’s kind of got to the end of my questions as such. Is there anything else that you wanted to say or wanted to elaborate on that you haven’t had chance to do so?**

Yes, I think a key difference with Save Our Schools that gave us so much traction was the fact that, as a result of that letter from my headteacher on the Let Kids Be Kids strike event, was that we have worked hand in hand side by side with our headteachers. And with the battle against high stakes testing we feel it has to be done in concert with the teaching professions, with headteachers whose unions have not represent their view.

**Absolutely.**

I mean I find the NAHT position on this nothing short of ludicrous, it’s far too many.

**Yes sure.**

This is off the record but I can say it in a way that can go on the record, but off the record it’s self-important men who enjoy their backroom chat proposition to make them all feel terribly important, they’re achieving sweet FA. And they do not represent you know the ability of their members, it’s a disgrace.

**Yes okay.**

Another of our aims is to get so many headteachers backing the More Than A School campaign then the NAHT has to change its position.

**Yes absolutely.**

And I’m fine for you to say that bit. So that’s our message, together. Together we can change the system.

**Yes absolutely. Okay.**

Because the government [27.26] we are not allowing them to do that and that is why they are [27.32] to coming out pathetic warped statistic responses to whatever we do, because the truth is, we are telling the truth and they are having to try and use smoke and mirrors to disrupt the truth that what we are dealing with is an absolutely broken system.

**Absolutely Yes. I couldn’t agree more. Well thank you so much Alison it’s been really nice to chat to you.**

Yes and you Ian, it’s great work you’re doing, really great.

**Yes thank you. I mean well it’s made possible through people like you giving up your time so thanks very much.**

No worries. Do you need anyone else to talk to Ian?

**I think for the moment what I’m going to do. I’ve done quite a few interviews with teachers and people like yourself. So at the moment I’m just going to take a bit of time just to reflect on what I’ve got so far. And then I think in probably September I’ll perhaps.**

You might want to talk to headteachers or?

**Yes that’s what I was going to try and do next. So maybe if it’s okay I might get back in touch with you and if you’ve got any names of people who you think would be interested in giving me their thoughts, I’d be really happy to hear from them.**

Yes, I can do that in September no worries.

**But it’s a bit of a. With it being the summer it’s probably not the best time to be contacting them. It’s also a good time to see what I’ve got so far, try and write a little bit of it up. And as I say, most of it will be published in academic publications but I’m going to do my best to try and make those open access so that people like teachers and headteachers and groups like More Than A Score have access to those and they’re able to use them as a way of.**

Ian, do you want us to use our massive PR expertise to try and get media coverage for it?

**That would be fantastic Yes. It’ll probably be a bit of a way off before I’m ready to present you with anything that looks like a kind of final report as such, just because these things take time and I’m juggling them amongst my teaching commitments etc. But certainly, within the next probably 10-12 months or so if that’s okay.**

Yes that’s fine.

**I’ll be very happy to send you something. And then maybe we could speak again about how we might try and spread the word as such and spread the fact that there is research happening and that academics share your views and are there to support you in the good work that you’re doing.**

Do you know Alice. Alice the researcher, I don’t know if she’s UCL. She’s doing a big piece of research on this at the moment.

**That’s her first name Alice?**

Yes.

**Do you know her surname at all?**

Hang on a sec.

**If it’s easier you could just email it me later if you’re struggling to find it.**

Alice Bradbury.

**Okay I’ll have a look. Oh, she is at UCL.**

Is she at UCL?

**Yes, she is. Great. Okay.**

Alice Bradbury is doing quantitative and qualitative research with headteachers.

**Okay brilliant. I’ll get in touch with Alice then. I don’t know her but she’s at my university, that makes it easy. UCL’s a big place. Brilliant alright well thanks so much again for your time Alison. And I’ll be in touch if there’s anything else that comes up. But in the meantime, I hope you have a really nice summer.**

Yes, and to you. I hope the same for you Ian.

**Alright thanks Alison for your time. Take care.**

Alright bye-bye.

**Bye.**