**Chris July 19**

**I just thought it would be really nice just to speak to you because I know that you’ve done some great work with Let Our Kids Be Kids. I guess I wonder if you’re okay to talk to me about it, if you think that we’re on the same wavelength.**

It feels like it yes.

**I should also let you know that this project has had ethical clearance as well. But if you do have any issues or concerns or want to withdraw from this then that’s absolutely fine. And I’m just going to take some notes if that’s okay. If you could perhaps tell me a little bit about yourself and your involvement in Let Our Kids Be Kids, and perhaps a little brief history of that and what prompted you to get involved with that.**

Well started it 2016 when [03.41] had children who were in Year 2 at the time and that was when the Year 2 SATs changed quite significantly. So all of a sudden, we found that they were being taught things which were 2 years higher and they should have been taught or thereabouts and teachers were on the verge of nervous breakdowns. And I found my son particularly who’d loved school until that point, as much as his school was amazing and they really tried hard not to [04.10] it obviously did come into everything and his teacher one day was in tears telling us all about it and he just switched off completely. All of a sudden, he went from loving everything to focusing on handwriting and joined up handwriting which he couldn’t do [04.25]. And there were quite a few of us who, largely at book club, we’d sit and moan about it at book club, and we all had kids in the same year or thereabouts. We’re all a mix at book club but largely quite a few of us teachers at various different levels, largely work with kids as well or have children around the same age. And we just decided we’d had enough of this and it either we shut up moaning about it or we did something about it really. We decided we’d put something out there to see what people thought and we’re a bit overwhelmed to be honest they felt the same way as us. We weren’t really expecting it to take off the way it did. We just thought we’d moot the idea of kids strike and see what happens, and all of a sudden, we had thousands and thousands of people involved in it. Yeah it got a bit scary. So we started from there. I’m a secondary teacher. I’ve been a secondary English teacher for the last 20 years. Although this year I’m not actually teaching in a school [05.24] I’ve decided to have a bit of a break to see what else I can decide to do because I’ve had enough of it all.

**Sure.**

And also, I’ve been involved with More Than A Score as well have you heard of that. So we’re doing a lot of work with More Than A Score campaign as well this year. So I’m doing a lot on that this year too. My son is now in Year 5, moves to Year 6 next year and as a secondary teacher I can see the effects of SATs [05.56] Kids are coming in less and less prepared for secondary school as far as we’re concerned. They’ve got a brilliant working knowledge of key terms but they’ve got no idea how to use them [06.10] of the same 3 adjectives

**Yeah sure.**

[06.14] No. Sorry. Can you tell me how to use them? No. [06.17] I don’t know.

**Yeah.**

Everything we try and teach, we’ve done this, we’ve done this, we’ve done this. Right done it but you can’t use it. Have no idea what it does [06.28]

**Yeah sure.**

We’re just coming in with more and more key terms and less and less real ability to use them and less and less understanding I found personally. My departments are the same. I’ve got friends who are teachers who felt the same. And we just felt that SATs are just [06.46] such a focus on it for Year 5 and Year 6 in a lot of schools. And kids are reading less. Having less and less stories [06.55] to them. They know certain stories inside out but they’ve got no wider knowledge of stories [07.02] literature is decreasing. Their interests in literature is decreasing you know and it’s heart breaking to watch. That has been my experience. It’s not just books [07.14] really doing kids a disservice these days.

**Absolutely and what you just said resonates so closely with a lot of other teachers that I’ve spoken to. If you’re interested, I’ll send you a research paper that I wrote which is about this issue of how decontextualised knowledge of grammar is the things that kids take with them to secondary school exactly like you were saying. So teachers as you just said, students can identify things but no experience of applying that in terms of contextualised or any kind of meaningful way.**

I think we’re finding it’s higher up as well in secondary schools. I’m doing exam marking at the moment and I’m just finding that I’m pretty much getting the same sentences reappearing over and over again, the same terms, the kids don’t really know what they mean but they’re putting them in there anyway.

**Yeah that’s interesting.**

[08.15] you know, no reason of why it’s there.

**Sure. So no kind of big picture focus or focused on words and individual words. Okay. So the boycotts that you organised from 2016 have they taken place every year then?**

No, we didn’t actually boycott the SATs that year because the whole point was that we felt from talking to so many teachers that we wanted to do something in support of teachers, say we think this is wrong and we’re supporting you. So also, we left it too late really to boycott for that year we realised how much chaos that was going to cause for the actual individual teachers and individual schools and we didn’t want to damage the schools. So what we did was have a kids strike day which was 3rd May which was prior to the SATs [09.08] that year. And we wanted [09.13] lots of people completely disagree with this we’re doing this completely in support of teachers and schools, not forced into this situation and we want you to change things because the teachers know it’s wrong, the parents know it’s wrong [09.27] and we want to see how many people are against this. It did, I mean it depends which newspaper you read, there were thousands and thousands of people out on strike, lot of hassle some of the newspapers.

**Yeah, I’m sure.**

So we [09.44] lots of different papers [09.47] our names and things at the time because we didn’t want them camping outside our schools because a lot of our schools were really good and we had spoken to our heads, they told them what we thought and they agreed with us. We didn’t feel it was fair that individual schools got penalised for it. So that was just a sort of one-off thing. People have asked would we do it again since [10.10] kind of thought we wanted it to raise an issue [10.12]

**Yeah.**

I think people are kind of thinking about maybe doing something similar again this year [10.20]

**Yeah.**

[10.26] you know more and more of the same really.

**Yeah.**

Without really listening so I don’t what’s going to happen this year and then working very much with More Than A Score as well which is more of a [10.36] difference [10.39]

**Yeah, I’ll definitely get in touch with them.**

There’s a meeting coming up in [10.53] is that right?

**That’s right yeah.**

The next meeting is in London on 2nd October. Got to be confirmed at the moment. But if you got in touch and said you were interested. There’s lots of other academics who are there from various different schools, various different backgrounds you’ll probably know quite a lot of them anyway.

**Okay great.**

They’re always interested in more people getting involved.

**No, I’ll definitely try and come along that sounds great. For me anything that. That was actually going to be one of my questions in terms of what kind of. Have you had much support from academics? And I’m thinking particularly linguists. I know the SATs are more than just the grammar tests but the grammar tests are really the focus of interest for this particular piece of research that I’m doing. Have you had much support from academics in terms of research projects or coming to your meetings or?**

It’s largely more early years specialists been involved. There is some current research being done, can’t remember the name [11.59] doing this one, the rest of us are doing secondary teachers and secondary teachers views on SATs [12.06]

**Okay.**

So that is underway at the moment, I think.

**Right okay.**

There’s been a group Reclaiming Schools have you seen them?

**Yeah, I’ve heard of them.**

Which is led by Terry Ridley I think largely. He’s involved in quite a bit of research with primary and secondary, I think. There was also, sorry I can’t remember all the names.

**No that’s okay.**

There was [12.33] who did some work into progress 8.

**Okay.**

[12.37]

**No that’s fine.**

I’m doing this off the top of my head.

**No don’t worry it’s fine. I can look him up.**

On a new conference this year [12.46] as well and that’s about [12.57] other things that we’re very concerned about now [13.02]. Boycott SATs with my son next year because [13.06] how much SATs affect the secondary progress 8 schools as well. I had friends last year who knew the 1st day of teaching they failed performance management for year because there was no way they could hit their targets, based on the targets these kids have been given on SATs. These are like DTT teachers or IT teachers or German teachers on progress 8 levels and data targets for the year were based on what kids had got in English and Maths.

**Sure.**

You can’t do that [13.36] there’s lots of research been done into that.

**Okay great.**

But yeah Terry Ridley might be one to contact and he can pass you [13.44]

**Yeah great thank you I’ll get in touch with those people. And you mentioned the NEU conference and there was the vote to boycott the SATs that took place about a month ago now.**

I think it just finished yesterday didn’t it, that was an indicative ballot.

**Yeah sure.**

Finished on 2nd was that yesterday.

**Yeah okay.**

I mean that’s the indicative ballot but unless that I think they needed 50% of teachers to vote [14.13] say yes before they would actually then go on to have a proper ballot.

**Yeah.**

So to be honest I’m not holding out much hope on that one.

**No sure.**

It doesn’t sound from looking [14.24] so far that there’s going to be a huge turnout. And I think they put. There’s 2 questions in it. The 1st question I think had a very good response, was it something like do you agree with standardised testing or do you think it’s wrong, something like that. And the 2nd question was would you [14.42]

**Yeah sure.**

Largely because they’re scared of what else is out there. They’re not quite sure what would happen if that left the SATs be taken away.

**Right.**

A lot of teachers teaching now have not taught anything other than SATs, don’t know what else they could find, they’re worried about teacher workload and [15.03]

**Yeah okay.**

But the issues are they’re actually doing all the things they need to do anyway. If they get rid of SATs tomorrow and they would still have all the assessment measures in place needed [15.15]

**It’s amazing how much power tests have isn’t it**

It’s awful.

**Over curriculum and authority and as I say there’s a big question there about whether any kind of formal assessment is required in the education agenda that exists in the UK. It’s probably very difficult to imagine something different. But my issue is, especially thinking about literacy and grammar and reading, is that there is no evidence whatsoever that the type of knowledge that’s being assessed in those tests does anything to improve literacy because it’s all decontextualised and very, very stripped out. It’s just divorced from context. And yet the amount of times I’ve heard Nick Gibb say that the government is boosting literacy, it’s just amazing how they can keep continuing to push this message despite the research evidence firmly pointing to something completely in the opposite way. And this is a government which they like to call them research informed but they’ve got a very selective view of what counts as literacy research unfortunately. I know there was the House of Commons Education Committee a couple of years ago which raised serious concerns and I was looking at that earlier.**

There’ve been 2 of those now [16.43]

**Yeah. So there’s been a 2nd have there?**

[16.46] went down to an all-party parliamentary group meeting about 6 months ago. And she was able to raise question there [16.55] And he basically said that SATs weren’t needed to assess schools by Ofsted. And it’s like well if they’re not needed at all to assess schools for Ofsted what exactly are these used for.

**Yeah sure.**

So all of that’s in minutes of what was said [17.18]

**Yeah. So when was that, do you remember that all party?**

Gosh I think it’s December time.

**So December 2018 was that?**

It would have been. Hang on I’ll see if I can find it.

**Okay great. Because I’d seen the House of Commons Education Committee but I hadn’t realised there was another one.**

I can try and send you a link to it later if I can’t find it.

**Yeah that’ll be great if you get a chance.**

I’ll do that is that okay?

**Yeah that’s fine. Shall I give you my email it might be easier?**

Yeah.

**It’s** **i.cushing@ucl.ac.uk****. That’ll be great I hadn’t realised that happened so I’d be really interested in having a look at that.**

Okay I’ll do that.

**And so apart from the education committees and the party parliamentary group have you had any other communication with the government or responses from government at all about things like the boycotts and the work that you’re trying to do?**

Not directly to us no. We’ve emailed them lots of times and sent letters lots of times. We’ve contacted our local MPs and we’ve had lovely letters back but nothing. Basically, we always get the standard line, increasing children’s levels, education is getting better etc, etc. Every time we’ve been [19.20] the same quotes [19.23]

**Sure, I can imagine. That’s really interesting. It’s really frustrating and I share your frustrations completely with what’s happening. One thing that I’m trying to do as I mentioned before is to try and have an impact on policy. But as has become very apparent it’s incredibly difficult to do so when you have a government that is obsessed with the testing regime and a high stakes assessment regime.**

The key thing we found is that parents need it as well so I don’t know [20.02] this is what. And this is largely what our aim’s been and from More Than A Score as well to try and change the general public’s perception of what these tests actually are. Because I think parents are very, very scared first of all with talking to heads about them at all because in some cases they think that their kids going to be in trouble at school which is nonsense. Then also they kind of think well if they exist, they must be right [20.31]

**Yeah sure.**

You can change things you know. They’re very scared to do so. They don’t want to be the ones to stand up to you know and there are little pockets all round the country [20.41] to do it.

**That’s really interesting.**

We’ll boycott next year when everyone’s spoken to my head about it [20.52] It’s not the test itself I’ve got no issue with children being tested it’s what the test it’s how the test is used you know.

**Yeah.**

What’s actually in the test and whether it’s relevant or not.

**Yeah.**

Assessment is needed [21.14] focusing on SATs and to the extent of everything else we’ve got to be fair my school that my son is at now it’s a middle school and they are pretty good and they’re trying very hard. And there’s other schools around here who already who’s year 5 friends from last year and they’ve stopped doing science this year to do extra English lessons, not doing any science this year at all. I bet next year that school will pretty much do English and Maths from Christmas and that’s it. And I hope they get good results, don’t get significantly better results than anybody else.

**Yeah sure.**

That’s one of my main issues around curriculum and the loss of love of interest in education.

**Absolutely. I mean you look at the numbers of kids taking English at A Level which has dropped significantly.**

Massively.

**Since the introduction of the new curriculum.**

Yeah.

**I’m sceptical of the current curriculum at secondary level as well and I’ve heard teachers being critical of that. Did you say that you’d been teaching for 15 years?**

20 years. I was [22.22] secondary industry for 20 years [22.23] and this year I’ve been doing little bits of work and little bits of supply work and stuff here and there and then I’ve been working [22.35] decided it was time for a break.

**Yeah sure. And over those 20 years then have you seen things change quite significantly towards a more conservative educational agenda and testing?**

I mean basically you teach to the test in year 7 [22.54]. The various exam boards produce practise exam papers from year 7 onwards. And year 7’s pretty much practise GCSE papers [23.07]. There’s a lot more focus now on grammar [23.11] in schools. I spoke to someone the other day actually who was doing some work with the TES and they were interested in similar to what you’re saying that how grammar teaching has changed in secondary as well and to what extent that’s shown in the new GCSEs. And I think 1st couple of years they’re realising [23.31] we very much did teach very prescriptively and it was [23.38] were told to you know the AQA board [23.42] you need to know this, need to know that, need to know other. And I think I’ve seen a bit of a shift now in terms of [23.49]

**Yeah.**

And I think people were quite scared at the start [23.54]

**Yeah.**

[23.56] because they don’t know what they mean. Well I don’t know how to use them.

**Yeah.**

[24.01] the rest of it is understanding how it’s used.

**Right absolutely.**

And I think [24.12] there seems to be a slightly different focus in terms of you get to the top band with using detail and [24.19] perception.

**Yeah.**

Which I’m pretty sure wasn’t quite the same [24.22]

**Yeah.**

In the old sort of papers, you want to get the top marks and the A\* in the old days used to have to show [24.31] that’s gone now. That’s not on the exam syllabus anymore.

**I mean the word creativity doesn’t appear a single time in the English curriculum at secondary school, there is no mention of it whatsoever. It’s just not there. Just one more quick question of that’s okay.**

Of course.

**The nature of the tests at primary school is very prescriptive as we’ve been talking about. Another thing that a lot of teachers have told me that seems to be happening, and I think that’s potentially a product of the tests, is that there’s been an increase in teachers correcting the use of pupils’ language in the classroom. So that might be saying that there’s only a right or a wrong way to use language or might be correcting non-standard forms of language or correcting non-standard use of speech or writing for example. Have you heard of any evidence of that yourself or perhaps seen any evidence of that yourself at all?**

I think so. And I am based in the north east so obviously we’ve got a lot of kids with very strong Jordie accents.

**Yeah sure.**

I would say that as teachers we’ve always made the children very aware that there is a kind of standard accepted way of actually talking and also there is dialect which is just as valid, so that’s always the way we’ve approached it here. The Jordie dialect is something very special.

**Definitely.**

And very unique [26.09] first of all we’re going to get an examiner from somewhere else who’s understand them.

**Yeah of course.**

So we have to be aware of that. But kind of the reasonably accepted level of written language but we’ve also made it clear that this is a dialect too and that it’s not wrong, they are different forms of language so that’s the way I’ve always approached it. And I think we would correct them to well it’s not correct, change to some extent even though things the same but I’ve always said it from a point of view of well that’s fine, it’s spoken. It’s spoken language, it’s fine to say that.

**Sure.**

Like we often say would’ve instead of would have and they don’t understand that would’ve is a shortened version of would have.

**Sure.**

And things like that you know we would always correct [27.03] just so they understand it essentially and understand what they’re doing.

**Sure.**

But we would never I mean in my school [27.09] say that is wrong.

**Yeah sure.**

Jordie teachers too but.

**Well that’s good to hear.**

We’ve always made it clear to them that this is standard English and this is the dialect and there is a difference and there’s a right and wrong time to use both.

**Yeah okay thank you. That’s really nice to hear. I mean there was a couple of stories actually about a school in the north east that had engaged in these kind of language policing policies.**

There are.

**Yeah it seems to be a growing kind of trend and perhaps it’s something to do with the new curriculum I’m not sure.**

I’ve marked some A Level coursework in the past which is completely in dialect form and it’s got top grades. So you can still get a top grade doing it, you just need to show that you understand how you’re using the language.

**Of course, absolutely yeah and it’s great to hear that you’ve been talking to kids about appropriateness and context and resisting that idea of right and wrong in a very binary way. That’s very much the way that the test is framed of course. It’s about there is a right and a wrong way of using language.**

I had somebody some A Level [28.27] coursework

**Okay great.**

Just [28.33]

**Brilliant.**

He understood the style, the format [28.43]

**Yeah.**

So he was playing with language that’s what we’ve always encouraged that language is something to be played with.

**Yeah.**

Adapted to how you want it.

**Great that’s really nice to hear. Okay well thanks so much for your time Clare I’ll let you get back to your marking. But if it’s okay then I’ve taken some notes that I might draw on in as I’m writing up some of this research, just a little bit about the history of Let Our Kids Be Kids. But I won’t use your name at all in any publications. Am I okay to use the name of Let Our Kids Be Kids as a kind of activist group that are doing some work and raising some concerns is that okay?**

Yeah that’s absolutely fine. Yeah just don’t give any [29.37] specifics away it’s just some people [29.40]

**Of course, yeah.**

That kind of thing so.

**Yeah absolutely. Not a problem. And I’ll send you any draft material of any publications that do arise from this so you can have a look at them. And I’ll also send you the literacy paper I mentioned which talks a lot about some of the things that you said in terms of decontextualised knowledge at key stage 3.**

Would you be happy if we [30.08]?

**Yeah absolutely. I’ve very happy to. It’s really important to me that academic research reaches parents and teachers.**

Anything that you think is valid and parents. But the trouble is sometimes you put things out and it’s a bit too complicated [30.27]

**Yeah sure.**

But anything you’ve got which you think would be useful now or in the future as well pass on we’re happy to share, we’ve got quite a wide audience obviously through Let Our Kids Be Kids at the moment.

**Great.**

I think this is a thing parents need to know.

**Absolutely yeah.**

This is kind of how we’re working at the moment we’re just trying to share things as much as possible while working in the background a bit more with More Than A Score, a lot more links than us.

**Yeah sure. Absolutely. I used to be a teacher before I came into academia. It’s always been a commitment that I’ve made in my academic research to maintain connections with teachers and make sure that research is accessible to teachers, because you know journals are often behind academic pay rolls so the thing will be really difficult for teachers and parents to access sometimes.**

That would be great.

**Great okay well thanks so much for your time Clare it’s really nice to chat to you.**

It’s been great. It’s lovely to know that people are actually doing some research into this and want to change policies.

**Absolutely yeah that’s our plan. Alright keep up the good work.**

[31.37] More Than A Score as well because [31.30]

**I will definitely that’s great. Okay thanks so much Clare. Bye-bye.**

Bye.