**Sally**

**Just very briefly describe your current role and how long you've been teaching for and your experience, so whether you've taught the content of either or both the key stage 1 or the key stage 2 curriculum in preparing students for those tests. Is that okay?**

Yes, sure. So I'm new into my current school as of September which is down in Brighton, where I live, and I'm a Year 6 teacher and I'm also the English lead for the school. Up until that I spent 3 years at St Georges Battersea which is a talk for writing training centre school in London which has got, I went there partly because they've had quite amazing results at teaching, you know, a very sort of deprived cohort of children and I was curious to see what the kind of underpinning pedagogy was that was making them so successful and I led English prior to coming down to Brighton so I've done quite a lot of work on the national talk for writing development group with lots of other schools that lead talk for writing training centre's and so I'm very interested in the teaching of English and the teaching of grammar and how they interplay with each other.

**Okay. And so have you taught the content of those tests then, you teach children that go [1:32]?**

Yes, I've been teaching Year 6 now for like, 4 or 5 years this time round and before that 3 or 4 years with a gap in between so yes.

**Great. And so very generally then what are your feelings about those tests in terms of, well anything really, your attitude towards them, the way that they've affected what happens in your classroom, your school, things like that?**

I mean, I think I'm probably not part of the mainstream viewer, like you'll read the kind of Michael Rose and death by fronted adverbials thing which is so commonly [2:10] out in the press and it really annoys me because it feels like [2:15] the pendulum swings between 2 ridiculous extremes and it stops us from actually seeing what is needed so I think the grammar test is not a particularly good one. I think that the model of teaching grammar that it has created is not a particularly helpful one either in terms of actually kind of feeding into good quality writing from children or actually particularly useful grammatical knowledge, I don't think it really delivers that, partly because it's so tightly tied to the terminology as opposed to actual understanding of what, how the language works.

**Right, I see. So a couple of things there, so I'm getting the sense that you believe in the value of learning and teaching about grammar and language.**

Yes, very much so.

**But the test creates teaching or pedagogies that isn't all that useful. Is that what you're saying?**

I think it's better than nothing but I think it’s a large investment of time goes into teaching children content that doesn't really feed into either understanding of how language works and sticks out or actually particularly improve their writing. Whereas [3:40] situation where you know, [3:43] where grammar just didn't really exist and we had a generation of adults whose grammar was rubbish and we're sort of functionally illiterate or not much better [3:54] and then went from that to…

[call cut off]

**So you were saying that you believe in the value of children learning about grammar but perhaps the tests are a little bit problematic perhaps in terms of 2 things. Number 1, writing and number 2, whether they test anything useful because they're quite focused on terminology. Is that a fair kind of?**

Yes, is it. That pretty much sums it up and I think if I were in charge, I studied classics and never studied full grammar as a kid but I did invest the time with then teaching grammar, if we're going to do that why not teach them Latin or some form of other foreign language which, where you're learning grammar by [0:47] we learn [0:49] and that sort of thing but it's in context and it's useful as well for life.

**Yes, sure. And that word context I think is really important especially thinking about the test because that's what a lot of the criticisms tend to be around, the fact that they assess decontextualized grammatical knowledge and maybe not even that, just decontextualized terminology.**

Yes.

**And you also mentioned about the impact on writing. Could you talk a little bit more about that?**

Yes. So as a Year 6 teacher I think that the most powerful way of teaching correct grammar [1:33] is the kind of methods that are used in, I don't know if you're familiar with the writing revolution?

**Yes, I am.**

So for me, that's like a bible, that’s how to do it. That's how grammar should be taught, how I teach it and it delivers incredible results I think because you're actually, you're teaching powerful grammar which is often quite difficult like, today I was teaching my class how to [1:58] positive in their writing but because it's relevant and it's grounded in actual examples that we're going to use in our writing, it's effective and we don't really dwell on what those things are called as much as how to make them, you know, the grammar should be the servant of the writer rather than the other way round. Whereas at a certain point in the year I know I will have to put that to one side and just kind of go for it with the getting ready for the key stage 2 test because otherwise they'll fail it.

**Right, I see. So there are certain times of the year that you have to revert back to the sort of teaching to the test pedagogies then.**

Yes, for quite a long amount of time, probably some of those children that, you know, and it goes on every year group to some extent is. I think what grammar teaching looks like in most classes, in most schools, is like just a sort of watered-down version of teaching to that test, death by via teaching terminology through a horrific thing [3:03] like quizzes and stuff which is like, yes, it's a huge waste of time, I think.

**Yes sure, because of the fact that you could be doing much other more valuable things with language right.**

Yes exactly.

**So the teaching to the test that you're sort of forced into doing is quite decontextualized, it's focused on test questions. Is that the kind of thing that you spend doing and preparing for that test then?**

It is yes.

**Yes. And that must be quite difficult for you as a teacher then, because I get a good sense that you have a really good, sensible set of principles for teaching about grammar but then there's certain points in the year which you're steered away from that because of how the test is designed. Again, is that an accurate kind of summary of what might happen then?**

Well we don't end up being steered away because I kind of, you can't stop teaching English but what happens is it eats up into other areas of the curriculum and you end up with an English lesson and then a grammar lesson which will end up, inevitably, it means you don't teach any music or DT or art or any of the wider curriculum you know, for whatever period of Year 6 is necessary to drive that content, which is, or you just accept that you're going to go [4:36] and not like, get the results that your school wants.

**Yes of course. And so English and grammar become 2 very separate things then.**

Yes, timetabled separately quite often.

**Oh really. So you have discrete grammar lessons as such that are set on the timetable?**

Yes.

**I see, okay. And so thinking a little bit more about the way that language is talked about and framed on those tests, again, a lot of the teachers that I've spoken to suggest that it's quite reductive in the sense that it frames language as being as about right or wrong, it focuses on very formal standard English, it talks about correct or incorrect uses of the verb for example. Have you got any thoughts about that at all?**

Yes, I mean I think that, because grammar is this profoundly complicated subject and I think if you go to the very top of it, the linguists and people who work in universities on it, are mostly the view that it’s a sort of slow-moving but moveable discipline with, you kind of end up with right answers that then change over time as opposed to being set in stone and then that gets reduced to some kind of non-subject specialist level to a kind of strict code like with maths [6:15] and then you end up with people going, 'oh well that's not the case, and therefore anything is right' so both those attitudes are kind of wrong, you know, the idea that I think children do need to understand the difference between standard and non-standard English but in a way that doesn't look down on other dialect and having worked in London with a lot of children that think the work 'ask' should be written 'aks' which is, you don't want to demean that because that is just, they're all completely fine with ways of speaking but you also want them to know that there is that formal register which is a very useful thing if you're going to take part in academic discourse. But it's very nuanced and I think that nuance gets lost.

**Right, because of the way in which it's reduced to, well a set of easily marked right or wrong answers, I guess.**

Yes. And partly because of the hostility that the test has created. So you've on the one hand got the issues with the test itself and the view of grammar that the test kind of has, and then you've got the kind of, the Michael Roses on the other side and the kind of very well educated authors who will say, 'well I didn't learn grammar and it did me no harm' and that whole of school of thought which children should just read real books and that kind of extends into the anti phonics thing as well and I think that whole thing is very dangerous because people who have survived poor systems because they’re intelligent or affluent or a mixture of all of those things like, shouldn't necessarily you know, read from their own experience that the same as going to work for everyone else because I don't think it will.

**Yes, absolutely.**

I think learning grammar and how to use the language well is an entitlement so.

**Of course, yes. The sort of celebration of how much you don't know and like a celebration.**

I know, exactly. That really really presses my buttons. Abi Elphinstone, she's a famous children's author did this famously big thing on Twitter where she said how she'd failed her reading SATS or something and kids, you know, shouldn't worry about it and I just, [8:47]

**Yes, it's perhaps not so helpful that is it, that.**

No. And particularly not if you're a kid who is going to need, you need those things in life because they haven't got the advantages that maybe she had, which meant she could still get this quite privileged position.

**Of course. Yes, it's very easy for people in privilege to say those things but not so much for everyone who's not in those positions of power. And of course, in Brighton, and around the country, but particularly in Brighton, there's been boycotts of the SATS.**

Yes, there has.

**Is that something that you've even been involved with or anything that you have any thoughts about at all?**

Well again I feel like this is where this kind of, these 2 opposite views which I disagree with both of, and end up sort of harming each other and I think that, you wouldn't say it in most staffrooms round here but I think we do need some form of accountability measure for how well we're teaching children. I think that is a reasonable thing to do and an interesting thing to note, providing that data gets used in sensible ways but there are multiple problems with the test as it stands and criticizing those problems ends up often in a like, binary either this test or no test and I think there's a middle way which is probably just a more intelligent attitude towards accountability for schools and I don't think tests are the monster they're made out to be or need to be.

**Sure. So I think what you're saying then is that the test, well the content of the test is a little bit problematic and perhaps needs a rethink but the presence of tests themselves isn't perhaps so much of an issue in terms of accountability and things like that. Is that accurate?**

That is a fair point, yes. And I think maths and reading, you know, we can sort of argue a bit about what they do to our teaching but actually I think there comes a point where we have to, professionals, accept that we're not going to do some of those things, you don’t need to reduce the reading curriculum to comprehension in order to teach reading and children to do well in the test.

**Yes definitely. And what about the amount of grammatical terminology that’s on those tests because that's often another criticism isn't it, you know, it's the sheer amount of terms that students have to learn. Any thoughts about that?**

I think it's really silly, I think they're kind of, when I studied Latin and Greek you would learn that grammar as a kind of tool for understanding the language and it's stuck with me because of having done that so it felt like a very meaningful way to get that knowledge but just to, when you're doing it in your own language to the level that is prescribed in the test which is quite extreme, I just don't think it serves any purpose to be able to identify by name, certain tenses. I think nowhere near as much as [12:06] explain the effect of being able to use a perfect tense in the writer when you're writing a flashback, it's far more interesting than just being able to spot it on a sentence.

**Of course. And that is arguably what gets missed in those tests isn't it, that as you say, the kind of effect and the meaning behind these choices and it reduces grammar to a kind of tick box and a feature spotting exercise which doesn’t necessarily lend itself to very good grammar teaching especially when there's so much work around things like talk for writing, the writing revolution and Debbie Myhill's work on grammar and, yes, okay.**

Yes, I agree and I don't think that the focus on teaching of grammar [12:50] a test has much of a causal impact on the quality of writing [12:56]

**No, not at all.**

Whereas I think stuff like the writing revolution or talk for writing, which makes grammar into the servant of the writer and you do still use that terminology but just to be able to explain why it might help you to write a suspenseful sentence. It's quite helpful to be able to use a term like ellipsis in that context.

**Sure. I think that's really useful and like sensible ideas and definitely resonates with my own thoughts about it, so thank you.**

I think children also find the terminology quite empowering when it's got a context and will happily talk about ellipses or whatever it is that's going to enable them to sound formal or to be suspenseful or whatever.

**Sure. But not so much as a kind of just discrete list of terms just to label off or stick into their writing for no purpose as such.**

Yes.

**Okay. I'm just looking through my list of questions, sorry, and I think we've pretty much spoken about most things that I wanted to. Was there anything that you wanted to comment on or that you haven't had chance yet to do so or any things that you'd like to revisit or clarify at all that you have spoken about?**

No, I mean I'm interested if there's any way of seeing the research when it finally comes out, I'd be very curious to see it.

**Of course, yes, definitely. It will take a little while just because the cogs turn quite slowing in academic publishing.**

What is the actual like thesis that is being put forward?

**Well, there's a range of things really, the sort of patterns that I've found…**