**Mark**

**If you could just briefly describe your current role and how long you've been teaching and whether or not you've taught the content of both the key stage 1 or the key stage 2 tests. Is that okay?**

Okay, yes that's fine. Well I teach at [school] which a little village school in [town] and I teach Year 3 there so I've got key stage 1 key [0:32] start key stage 2 and prior to then I taught for 5 years at a massive trust school and I taught Year 5 there for 4 years and that was all heavily test related.

**Yes, I was looking [inaudible 0:46]**

[0:47] SATS test, training for SATS tests.

**Oh right, interesting. Yes, I was just looking at your survey responses and I picked up on that, that you'd obviously changed schools and the multi-academy trust school was very heavily focused on the test then. Is that true?**

Yes, it was completely focused on teaching for the test. Everything we did was shaped and controlled by that test.

**Right. And so what did those lessons look like then and how much time did that take in preparing for those tests?**

So they set up for the lessons in terms of what we were teaching was based on where they're at so based on [1:28] tests so [1:29] test for the reading side and the language that was used in there and then at the start of the year we'd have given them a SATS test and that would have based how we grouped and what we had to cover and how it was taught and every half term we'd give them another SATS test, grammar test and we'd keep track.

**Wow, okay.**

[1:52] actual current SATS test that the Year 6's would take that the Year 5 would then take and then that would take the last half term which would be sort of boot camp.

**Right, okay.**

Yes, so very much a teaching for the test.

**And what was that like as a teacher doing that?**

Well obviously I didn't like it that much which is why I've left after 5 years but it certainly made a difference to the children because it's quite interesting to see how much they retained it which I don't think they retained it as much as teaching it, sort of, sat within your lesson. So obviously I've been at my current school for half a term and teaching using a different scheme, not testing them, the retention of basic elements of grammar but the retainment across the whole board is completely different.

**Right, I see. So are you enjoying life a bit more now you're teaching?**

I liked it a lot before, [2:56] teaching a trust, I learnt that the hard way.

**Yes. That’s really interesting. And so obviously you're thinking now about 2 quite different settings it sounds like. How much power do you think those tests have then? Obviously, in your old school, they had quite a lot of power in the sense that they determined what you taught. You talked about lots of preparation for the tests. Why do you think schools do that then? Why do you think they have so much power in shaping the curriculum like that?**

I think from an academy point of view you're set up into tables so every primary school, we had 18 primary schools, so it's set as in you're competing against each other and it was, from their point of view, it was to see which schools which [3:57] were at the bottom of the table to give them extra support so they would have a grammar specialist come to the school which seemed to be what that was geared up for was like, ultimately, tests at the end of it to see where the money is going to be spent.

**Yes, sure. That's interesting. That's quite different in your current school then, I think things are a little bit different to that are they?**

Yes, there's not that budget, that scope. At the same time there's no, other than the SATS at the end of the Year 6 and Year 2, there's not that heavy interest in it. It's much more shaped around the children, the text they were teaching [4:38] read writing which is an Oxford tree application I believe and that shapes our teaching of spellings, teaching of grammar. Then we base [4:53] tools for writing, we use a text as well to teach in the other parts of it.

**Okay, great. That sounds good. And so thinking about the content of those tests then, in the grammar tests specifically, so not just about tests in general and the problems of teaching to the test, how do you feel about the actual content of the grammar tests then in what children are tested on and the content of the grammar that you have to teach and the purpose of teaching that grammar etc. What are your attitudes and feelings about that?**

I see the point of it. I see why it's done, why it's shaped the way it is. But when you're teaching children about progressive and present and direct and indirect speech, it just seems to be a tool for assessment. So when a child is at secondary school he got retested when he went straight into Year 7 and you sit there talking to him and I've been in secondary schools to do bit of [6:02] teaching and they don't use half the things that we have to teach them at primary school level.

**Yes. So there's no continuity then.**

No, it's quite frustrating.

**Yes, I bet.**

I've seen the difference and we have to teach them this, we have to teach them how the speech is used, different parts of the speech, all these parts of grammatical knowledge that they then don't use.

**Right. So you're doing all of this work at primary school, spending all this time on it and at secondary school sometimes it can just disappear.**

It just doesn't match up.

**Yes, sure. There's a bit of a mismatch between the curriculum policy there and the content isn't there, it seems.**

I think so. And they both need to be on board I think, secondary and primary schools, here's what we're going to be teaching, because I've sat and had the conversation it's how important are the Year 6 SATS to shaping the children, shaping the curriculum and most of them say that we can count the tests, we don't do the SATS test as much. We use them to group them in the first place but in terms of what they've scored, other than those children at the bottom of the list, they don't pay much attention to it.

**That's interesting, yes. And that must be really frustrating as a primary school teacher who's spending time on those tests.**

Yes. We have to teach children to pass tests as such or do the best they can to have the best chance of passing it then that’s not carried over into Year 7, Year 8.

**Yes of course.**

It ultimately becomes quite a pointless task.

**Yes of course. And I'm just looking again at one of the things that you said in that survey which was, the sort of impact that the tests have had in widening or narrowing the curriculum and just picking up on there what you said that you said in the survey you feel that they're narrowing the curriculum at most schools as passing the test seems to be their priority so what do you mean by narrowing the curriculum in that sense? How have they done that?**

Well from my experience of being in a trust school there's [8:10] so whatever the big gap is with the class that then seems to be the focus so it's about [8:18] everything else can fall to the sides, be picked up in little pieces but if there's a class [8:23] conjunctions, what's something that they really lacked on, that would then be the focus until they could pass it. In terms of achieving the data to say that they have retained it enough.

**So the teaching is totally geared towards the test content in your experience of that multi-academy trust then?**

Yes, it obviously becomes a box-ticking exercise.

**Yes sure. And do you believe in the value of students learning about grammar then, thinking not so much now about the tests but learning about grammar and learning about terminology and language etc?**

Children need to know about grammar and terminology but different to how it should be done. And I firmly believe to use it through reading and building [9:09] and improving our techniques. I was teaching [9:13] and trying to relate it into what they're interested in.

**Yes, right, that makes a lot of sense. And again, a lot of the teachers that I've spoken to have talked about the test being very decontextualised. Is that what you're touching on there?**

Yes definitely.

**So do you see any impact of the test content then and the grammar focus on the curriculum, do you see any impact at all on it on students reading or writing ability?**

I think from what I've seen is you get [9:45] through any stage, is there's children naturally bright and they have everything in that you want to see and you have these 8-year-olds going in writing at a level that you'd expect from a 10-year-old. At the same time as then you've got [10:00] typical ones who fall in that bottom percentile who can write but they're not getting everything in.

**I see, okay. That makes sense.**

So as much as it depends on the individual child I think they've got to be given that scope and that, almost physical real-life examples.

**Yes sure. And so the test being very decontextualised then arguably, don't really do that then.**

I don't think the tests, from what we're saying, especially in reading papers as well [10:34] as well is there's not that, they don't feel natural.

**Yes. In what way?**

Especially with someone [10:42] and their formal language ones we always use quite a lot as an example when you've got children who don't specifically use formal language when they're speaking or when they're writing. But then for the sake of a test question, you have to then teach them three 20-minute sessions SPAG sessions of teaching how formal language is used. And they go into the test and the get the question wrong because as soon as that session is finished, they're not going out and talking in the formal way or they're not writing in a formal way.

**Yes definitely. That leads me quite nicely onto my next, kind of, last couple of questions really which is about formal language on the tests and about standard English because the tests arguably kind of emphasize standard English right, and very formal language and you started to touch upon that there in your answer. So just, at the risk of repeating yourself a little bit I suppose, but how do you feel about that emphasis on standard English then, in the tests and the emphasis on the requirement for very, almost hyper formal language in the tests?**

I think it's important because it's part of the curriculum, standard English, but from my point of view I'm quite interested in the reading elements so for me we could use it passage of text, side by side [12:07] well this one is formal language, we can spot that because of this. This one we can see is written in formal language, it's almost comparing it then having the children write and compare the writing. As opposed to which wedding invitation is written the most formally? And you've got 9, 10 and 11-year-olds who've got no previous evidence of seeing a wedding invitation in their lives, it's just [12:34] trying to make it feel real life which [12:37] children learn the best way.

**Yes of course. And the sort of very formal language in the tests that you mentioned before maybe isn't an accurate representation of their own language at all, it's very distant or removed from the language they might be using, right.**

I think that’s where the biggest gap is. I mean there was a question from 2 years ago in the SATS paper which was a wedding invitation and I went through it with a couple of children afterwards and it was, why have you chosen that question [13:11] but that's how we speak. So is there a problem of how we speak so it's almost that there was a class [13:19] education between whether it’s a wider knowledge inference. You've got children sitting there, going, but that is how I'd speak to my parents or that's how I'd speak to my friends and it's almost [13:33] well, therefore, you're speaking informally.

**Yes definitely.**

[13:39] is one posh, is one chatty, this class has one, that class, it's just a can of worms almost.

**Yes definitely. And you can do so many fun good things with like ranges in formality and language can't you, but if you're spending all of your time teaching about formal language that doesn't match the language that the children use then what a shame that, you know, they're not getting that experience of good language study.**

At the end of the day, it's only got one mark on the SATS paper which, they're going to pick up the language from it going to their GSCEs and they start looking in deeper, like deeply at Shakespeare or [14:21] spectacles and they can see the difference of language there.

**Yes definitely, that makes so much sense. Great, thank you. I'm just looking at my list of questions and I think we're almost at the end. Was there anything that you wanted to talk about or that you haven't had the chance yet to do so or anything that you want to revisit or clarify at all in anything that you've said so far?**

In terms of data, where do you see it going forward? Do you see it making a change to how the questions and tests are being set?

**Well, I would love to say yes but my previous discussions with the DfE and the government is that they don't like listening to research that doesn’t suit their agenda.**

Yes, that makes sense.

**So Nick Gibb for example, the school's minister, has always defended the tests on the grounds that they improve writing but most of the teachers, if not all of the teachers that I've spoken to, say something very different and they say that it creates very artificial writing. We also have teachers like you who have said their experiences have just kind of narrowed the curriculum and that they've just been teaching to the test but the government don't really like listening, they don't really like hearing that so yes, I would like to say that the research is going to lead to policy change but these things take a while to do but what the research will do is it will give teachers a voice I think about these things which is really important. So the research will be published in academic journals but I'm also going to do something for the TES and other outlets similar to that as well and yes, just trying to challenge and critique some of the problems with the tests and I've got no problem in children learning about grammar and language, quite the opposite, I want them to learn about that but just perhaps not in the way that the tests are designed and that's what a lot of teachers have said to me as well so, yes, it's trying to speak up and give a platform for those voices really.**

It’s the more they read, that's what we've found is, the more they read [16:41] see in terms of their writing terms of SPAG side of things, and it's giving that vary of that depth of reading so we use quite a lot of comic books [16:53] Roald Dahl. Just in that whole context and all the pieces of text and new pieces of text.

**Yes, that sounds great.**

But comic books seem to be the biggest, almost the biggest help.

**Yes. And they sound great but again, the government would probably look upon that and say, well that doesn't count as reading, which is just nonsense, you know, they have a very prescriptive idea of what kind of text children should be reading and yes, unfortunately for some bizarre reason comic books doesn't fall into that but, who knows.**

Yes, it's ridiculous.

**Yes. Okay well, thanks so much for your time.**