

A Kind of Twilight: how do teachers of English at Key Stage 3 respond to the requirement to prepare their students for SATs?

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ABSTRACT This article presents extracts from interviews with 14 teachers of English. It indicates some of the tensions which result for such teachers from having to prepare Year 9 students for the 'national' tests in English toward the end of Key Stage 3. These are high-stakes tests: they supply the means to compile school 'league tables' and the material by which authorities judge whether schools, departments and individual teachers have met given targets. For teachers, readying students for Standard Assessment Tasks (SATs) can entail confronting in a sustained way the extent and depth of the loss of professional autonomy. Teachers speak of the costs of complying with and adapting to the requirement while attempting to maintain their convictions.

I have been talking recently to a handful of teachers of English about how they respond to the requirement to prepare their Year 9 students for National Curriculum testing. These teachers work in urban, suburban and rural schools in four different education authorities and range from those newly entering the profession to those with several decades of service to their credit. About half hold posts of responsibility. Most are full-timers in mixed comprehensives, some in single-sex comprehensives, a very few are part-timers and one has left the state sector for the SATs-free zone of a private faith school. They told me how the requirement to prepare students for the Key Stage 3 Standard Assessment Task (SAT) indentures them to frustration and self-defeat, for they must work against their core-beliefs as English teachers. Doing so, they find themselves manoeuvred into an inauthentic position vis-à-vis their students and themselves. Enduring thereby greater or lesser degrees of unhappiness, they are compelled to act in ways antipathetic to their own nature and their judgement as professionals as well as against what they see as the best educational interests of their students.

In presenting extracts from the transcripts of my interviews I have changed teachers' names. I have also occasionally recorded in seconds the length of pauses or silences. I have indicated omissions from the transcript thus: I have made some unmarked cuts, for example of false-starts and repetitions, in order to streamline the text for readers. Interviews are not, of

course, to be read as giving anyone's final word on anything, and in presenting extracts out of the context of the whole conversation and some weeks or months after the talk took place there is a risk of elevating a passing utterance to the oracular. Likewise the temptation lurks to draw general and wide-ranging conclusions from the experiences of a random few, conclusions which could not be warranted on such a basis. However, what these teachers have to say seems to me important both in itself and as further testimony to the malign influence National Curriculum testing can exert on what it means to be an English teacher.

Always Having to Talk about the Exam

For all these teachers, what they valued ran hard up against what they were required to do to ready students for KS3 SATs.

Tom: ... this is what I find so frustrating about the education now ... this idea that we push 'em and push 'em and push 'em and push 'em into little slots ...

Ellen: ... I really hate things like that. I hate it being that rigid and saying OK we *have* to do this we have to do this and a kid said to me in class [she puts on a deep voice] why is it always about assessment he said he actually said it why are we always having to talk about the exam why do we and I thought I know ...

Martin: ... I think Key Stage 3 is ... (2) ... [*exhales*] a bureaucratic nightmare um simply because it's it's not about children it's about testing teachers and schools so that they can be put into some sort of league table which has no bearing on the actual quality of what English should be in the classroom. English has been reduced to bite-sized nuggets ...

Frances: ... I think um ... (3) ... well ... (3) ... yeah I mean I suppose I am frustrated if I see that you know able and interesting and interested children suddenly sort of begin to lack motivation because they feel like they're doing you know similar tasks or that we're trying to jump through hoops in order to make sure that everything's been covered ...

Ben: ... I mean the piece in the writing paper where kids had written you know a side a side and a half and had zero marks for it. I mean how can you not reward a kid anything for... a side and a half of cohesive coherent prose just because it didn't follow some set ... plan or order ... that's basically saying you might as well have written nothing and you'd actually have got no less marks.

Hazel: ... and then after that January of Year Nine onwards I don't feel comfortable about the way we teach but ... (2) ... we do lots of um we break SATs papers down into individual questions, we do lots of teacher-models and [unintelligible] try and make it fun but oh it's deathly.

PY: In what way 'deathly'?

Hazel: Students become demotivated I would say um [*laughs*] teachers become demotivated um it feels like well you are you are completely teaching to the test, the only good thing I can say about it is if the students have to do it ... I think we should make them feel as confident as possible ... though that's the only way I can justify it to myself ... but I know that actually it's because of pressure for Key Stage 3 results.

Against My Better Judgement

Direct SAT-preparation was felt to eradicate engagement, interest and vitality in the classroom, but such work could not be entirely avoided. Some departments tried to minimise the length of time given over to it. Some devised novel ways of re-grouping students and generating a sense of event, to boost morale ahead of the tests. Even so, individual teachers expressed reservations about being placed in such a position:

Grace: Don't you think the excitement's gone though ... the excitement of ... learning. I know that not all children will get excited about but in what we have to do I think the excitement ... I just feel you can't do as interesting activities in the lesson ... (2) ... as

Ellen: Because you've got to get through it or you have to

Grace: Yeah and I know ... you're always going to have the National Curriculum and the Literacy Strategy. I mean we've always had that since we've been teaching and I just feel the excitement has gone, there's all these wonderful ideas that you've got that you'd like to do but it's so difficult to try and fit in to everything and it's such a shame and you know that you perhaps could interest them if you could do these things but

Ellen: The other thing as well I think is that it's like a ... a ... horrible vicious circle because ... the kids ... are bored and they don't like it and they don't like what they've got to do and maybe I don't particularly as well so then they're badly behaved and then I think oh well I couldn't do ... the fun things because I don't trust them enough

Grace: [*laughs*]

PY: Mm

Ellen: to be able to do them because they're badly behaved because we've started off by talking about SATs that they don't like and they're bored [*laughs*]

David: ... there comes a time and I think it generally is with the actual study of the key scenes [i.e. of the Shakespeare play set for the SAT] when things become a little bit more teacher-led um the scope for perhaps individual or group discussion certainly tends to diminish, certainly I feel that that's the way I end up approaching it

against my b/you know against my better judgement effectively
but ...

Frances: ... you know doing lots of interesting work with the autobiography and in a sense that is ... all helping towards the SATs anyway because they're writing in different styles and for different purposes and audiences er but when it's made so explicit like we are going to do [*taps table*] writing to describe or whatever it is then I can definitely see that oh towards the end it was becoming like a ... a treadmill you know and it was difficult for me because I felt ... that the lessons were becoming quite disjointed so I was trying to make sure I was covering all the bases at the same time trying to think of activities that would be engaging you know.

Denying What I Believe

Teachers expressed in a range of ways the sense of conflict between their own core-beliefs and the need to ready students for SATs. Sometimes silence, the pause before answering or the mid-phrase hiatus, would seem to mark the moment when a more than usual degree of emotional intensity made itself felt. Sometimes they might exhale, as if sighing. They might laugh, as if to signal something absurd in the situation they were talking about or to register the mismatch between what they might want and what was possible. Sometimes their body language would indicate annoyance or unhappiness. They might also speak to the point. The widest and most nuanced variety of descriptive language emerged from questions about how SATs-preparation made these teachers feel. Anger, frustration, guilt, inadequacy, dispiritedness, a sense of self-betrayal, of self-censorship, fear, cynicism, bitterness, misery, even hatred, were variously and intensely voiced. For one long-serving teacher ready to articulate the intellectual and moral seriousness of her work and facing particular kinds of pressure, to accommodate to a prevailing orthodoxy with which she disagreed meant profound self-questioning.

PY: I kind of meant also ... in the sense of of kind of personal corruption.

Claire: Mm Mm

PY: Is that something that you recognise that you you've felt you've thought about and if it is could you talk about it?

Claire: Yeah and I well I mean I think sometimes I I possibly feel that too much sometimes I feel that you know to even sort of start thinking about this in a different way would maybe be sort of um ...
(3) ... denying what I believe you know ...

A Very Tedious and Spent Argument

Members of Claire's department faced what appeared to be particularly concentrated forms of pressure from inside and outside school to ensure a

higher percentage of students achieved at Level 5 and above in their Key Stage 3 English SATs. This pressure appeared characterised by its relentlessness and its authoritarianism. Resisting it exacted a toll.

Andy: I think there's always going to be er compromise in teaching ... but I think it does seem to ... in some ways got worse ... and I suppose it's to do with having to go to meetings and listen to people er talk about the Strategy and the SATs results and and it's become very tedious because um you know you get a chart of ... of levels this percentage in Year 6 and this in Year 9 and inevitably I put my hand up and say are we talking SATs results or Teacher Assessment here and there's a sort of you know sigh

Claire: [laughs]

Ben: [laughs]

Andy: from the people running the meeting saying yes Andy we're talking about SATs results.

Claire: [laughs]

Andy: yes well it's not on the chart and you didn't say that and and I suppose little by little I've stopped putting my hand up and pointing those things out and become more silent in some of those ... meetings and school meetings because ... you've said it all before and so I think it's a bit like you know when one of the members of your family makes a really racist or homophobic comment and you don't say anything, you don't challenge it and you feel bad about yourself for not doing that but on the other hand you recognise that there's probably not a lot of point in doing it, you know making those comments challenging them but I kind of feel in a way a bit like that now in a lot of meetings that I...bite my tongue I don't say stuff because I've said it before and...in fact I think it was thoroughly said it's been said to people like me er by the Head ... you know that's a spent argument...that's a very tedious and spent argument ... and that's annoying but it's when you internalise it and you stop [exhales] putting your hands up in the meeting er you feel bad about yourself and I guess that's er to do with morals isn't it that's to do with you feeling that you're not acting now the way you ought to ...

The teachers I interviewed in this department require to be intellectually convinced of the educational value of what is being imposed, and have yet to be. They recognise the possibility that their own stance may be overly fixed, and they strive to remain open to alternative ways of considering English teaching. Yet out of commitment to thought and principle they also strive to defend what they regard as proven best practice. This is also to defend themselves, for they embody such practice in their daily work and in their histories as teachers, in some cases of long standing in the school. By their own

account they find themselves not only having to comply with practices they profoundly disagree with, but having to comply visibly:

Andy: ... I've been instructed to go to the meetings at [gives location] to meet with the consultants ... whereas before I was not going all the time cos I didn't want to miss my lessons now I have to go in order to be seen to be ... complying with it in order to appease [names authority outside the school] who are worried about the results at Key Stage 3 ...

Damage

The damage which accrues from as it were working against one's self is in part physical. Teachers told me of becoming ill, of losing sleep, of feeling they were heading towards a breakdown. There is also damage, or at least an adverse impact, at the level of professional self-confidence and belief:

Claire: ... I had a very long fight earlier in the year which went on for about three or four months as to the Head was trying to impose the optional tests which are optional

PY: Yes

Claire: Um [laughs]

Andy: [laughs]

Claire: and I had argued that I didn't think they were valued and not particularly helpful ... it turned into a complete battle you know a real ... time-wasting stressful um ... week after week of my expertise being just completely disallowed ... being told by [she explains where the instructions came from] that this is what improved results so this is what we had to do and I felt entirely undermined both as a Head of Department and as a professional... English teacher that what I had to say had no relevance or [unintelligible] whatsoever and I found this ...

Quite how or what Claire found this she could not put into words, in my view because something fundamental about herself had been set at naught by those who should have acknowledged its true high value. She names her *expertise*. I believe such expertise likely to comprise not only high competence as a practitioner, but an informed and developed sensibility attuned through long experience and reflection to the needs of students in classrooms. Something like what has been called educational connoisseurship. Such necessarily teacherly, individual and hard-won qualities are supplanted by the fiat of 'what works', to pernicious effect.

PY: So this professional issue

Claire: Mm

PY: stayed with you out of school

Claire: Yes yes oh yes it yes very deeply ... upset me because I've been there twenty years and ... we've had arguments about matters of professionalism but I've never had my professionalism undermined in that way ... and totally ignored *totally* ignored yeah ... I was being instructed to do something in spite of the fact that I'd spent a long time putting up arguments against it.

You Don't Even Get a Qualification

Several teachers remarked that work done to prepare students for SATs was experienced not only as an imposition but as a pointless one.

Rob: the children here ... a lot of them aren't performing as well as they can because they don't value it anyway themselves without me saying anything or their parents saying anything ... so we wanted to have courses which would actually benefit the qualification that we felt mattered [i.e. the GCSE] because SATs you know you don't even get a qualification out of it ...

Kate: ... you see ... SATs have never meant anything have they ... except as a ... [*exhales*] ... (3) ... something that can be used against an English teacher or a Head of Department I mean it's never ... (2) ... they're never quoted in anybody's CV or anything [*laughs*]

Martin: ... there is no correlation between Key Stage 3 and Key Stage 4 as far as any sort of certification or acknowledgement or anything like that is concerned, it remains a sort of twilight of this is what we do at the end of certain age-periods and that's it there is *no* correlation with Key Stage 4 where the syllabus completely changes ...

A sort of twilight. A treadmill. For Hazel a funnel: *it's like they go through this sort of funnel ... funnel-neck at Year Nine [shows with her hands] and then it opens out again at GCSE.* These images suggest to me that their coiners see the English Key Stage 3 SAT as outmoded and marginal, neither summation nor new departure, a place of reckoning whose features are confinement, weariness and tedium.

Dual Focus

As well as registering costs and losses, many of the teachers I interviewed spoke about their determination to counter the constraints placed on them:

Rob: ... all I can do is keep balancing it so I still don't give it much time.

PY: No.

Rob: I won't sacrifice all the strengths that our Year 9 course has ...

Hazel: ... my aim is to stick to my core-values [taps Interview Schedule] as far as possible access for all entitlement for all and then I'm hoping that the Key Stage results will follow that.

Lesley: ... there's a kind of confidence that has allowed us to kind of steer through all the national curriculum constraints ... we will generally do what we think is best and works ... for the pupils but at the same time we are very exam-focused I'd say ...

Lesley developed her thoughts about the ability of teachers to sustain a wider educational offer despite externally-imposed constraints:

Lesley: ... then as time has gone on you get the department very well-trained in how to coach...students through those exams for those exams ... now as time has gone on um I think you get some improvement in teacher-capacity to have a dual-focus teach so the pupils can pass the exams and then also not narrow the range [i.e. of the educational offer made] too much ...

Transcribing this last comment I heard not *dual-focus* but *duel-focus*. Such mis-hearing no doubt springs from a bias of my own, and one given extra impetus because I no longer have to ready Year 9 students for the SATs. Yet duelling does occur. At the level of language (these are English teachers after all), phrases such as 'delivering the curriculum' and other kinds of what Kate called *trendy newspeak* were mocked in interview. Perhaps this was a way to ease the tension caused by having to work within a powerful discourse which continues to throttle the one many of these teachers preferred:

Kate: ... I found it extraordinary that the pupils were expected to answer [on Shakespeare] in a kind of quasi-O Level manner in SATs when they're not required to do that under exam conditions at either GCSE or at A Level ... (2) ... but OK they could do it and we put a lot of effort in into um ... facilitating this [*laughs*] using the right word I daren't say training but in um you know coaching the children to write in this way.

Jane: ... but there again I still do get a buzz out of being in the classroom ... um ... so that keeps me in it. I don't want to be an Advisor because I don't want to be going around schools showing these stupid little videos of perfect lessons and going on about ... you know modelling scaffolding this-ing and that-ing and all the rest of it and all those words you have to use all the time.

Some teachers were prepared to tell me how they avoided one of the likely costs of compliance, the micro-management of their actual teaching:

Frances: ... where I taught last year we were given a sort of ring-bound great big book and then ... you'd literally see teachers turning to the page and copying the objective from the book [*she mimics these actions as she talks*] and so that to me seems a bit ridiculous.

PY: Do you put the objectives up on the board?

Frances: [*Quietly*] Only when I'm being observed! [*laughs*]

Others spoke about organising for SATs boycott votes in their unions or in the subject association to which they belonged.

Foolish Question

Simply by talking about the effects of the compulsion they faced, and its variety, these teachers might be said to sustain the *duel-focus*. I tried to ask each of them why, given what is known about the damage SATs do and the disregard accorded them by the private sector and the way other of the Home Countries have dropped this model of testing (if indeed they ever took it up), teachers continue to prepare their students for the tests. A foolish question, it fortunately drew wise responses. Teachers feared sanctions. They felt they had no choice. They needed to keep their jobs. They were enduring the consequences of political defeat or of the accountability culture. And after all life was partly about doing things you didn't want to do. One's own views should defer to what students within the system needed.

But what if students first and foremost need their teachers free of fear and possessed again of choice in matters of curriculum, evaluation and assessment?

PY: ... um given how ... unhappy you feel

Grace: [laughs]

Ellen: [laughs]

PY: why do you teach SATs?

Grace: Why do we teach ...

PY: Why do you teach SATs?

Grace: SATs?

Ellen: I do it probably because of what I'm told to do.

Grace: Yeah it's just ... (2) ... um [laughs] I think it's ... I don't know we just don't really ... complain ... like we don't do anything about it ... I don't think that what I'd say ... would make too much of a difference.

Ellen: and Ofsted obviously want to see me teaching [laughs] the SATs ... so I would say ... (3) ... for them you know then I I would do it for them and I would do it you know so that at the end I don't get in trouble for not getting ... Level Fives for the kids but then I think ooh what then what am I actually doing it for the kids ...

Grace: Mm

Ellen: ... am I actually teaching ... (2) ... for the kids.

PATRICK YARKER is a doctoral student at the University of East Anglia. He would be very glad to hear more from teachers of English about responding to the requirement to prepare students for KS3 SATs.

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