To what extent does teachers’ confidence affect the teaching of spelling, punctuation and grammar?

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Abstract:

This project set out to understand: To what extent does teachers’ confidence affect the teaching of spelling, punctuation and grammar? The research aimed to use this understanding to improve pedagogy in this area and consequently in English as a whole subject. Questionnaires and interviews from a sample of five teachers were used alongside field notes within a one form entry primary school. The research found a lack of confidence in current educational policy and the priorities of the government for English. Teachers felt a strong emphasis on the SATS test has had a detrimental effect on children’s writing and creativity within English. The project concludes with suggestions for teachers to work to achieve a balance between governmental policy and their own philosophies for teaching.

This project took place in 2017, three years after the introduction of a new National Curriculum by a conservative government. In 2016, statutory tests based on this curriculum were introduced to assess Spelling Punctuation and Grammar (SPAG) in year 6. The project, therefore, sought to investigate the effect that these changes has had on teachers’ confidence and their teaching of SPAG, along with the possible effects this may have had on children.

Literature Discussion

A Crisis of Confidence?

Many agree that teachers are most effective if they are confident (Weimer, 2012; Lomba, 2014; Quigley, 2016). In a practical sense, this could link to behaviour management and well-prepared planning (Herbert-Smith, 2014) as well as a ‘deep knowledge and understanding of the subjects they teach’ (Ofsted, 2016, p.47). However, teacher confidence is a more complex and multi-layered issue.

Reflecting on reports that many teachers leave the profession in their first few years (Harding, 2015; Weale, 2015; Press Association, 2016), Quigley states:

Clearly, we have a problem when far too many new teachers fail to ever achieve the confident degree of expertise that would carry them through to a satisfying, lifelong teaching career (Quigley, 2016).

It is also evident that teacher retention is not only a problem for new teachers, but the profession as a whole (DfE, 2015). Quigley suggests that a lack of ‘expertise’ is the cause of teachers leaving the profession, which could be related to subject or pedagogical knowledge. However, the articles referenced above which report the figures present a more contentious picture of the current political climate in education being to blame. Perhaps, then, although confidence in their own expertise is an issue for some, educational policy and priorities may have played a part in this doubt, pointing to a lack of confidence in the government itself.
In order to teach meaningfully and effectively, teachers must be confident in the rationale of what they are teaching and see the ‘bigger picture’ of the learning process rather than an end product (Arthur et al, 2006, p.71). Yet, our education system places strong emphasis on test results, with UK children being among the most tested in the world (Cassidy, 2008; Simpson, 2008; Downs, 2016). This highlights a possible misunderstanding of achievement by the government, in which a measurable concept of knowledge acquisition hinders richer, more valuable aims of education such as curiosity and interpretation (Garner, 2014; Handscomb, 2015, p.1-3). Correspondingly, a revised version of Bloom’s Taxonomy (see figure 1) (Anderson and Krathwohl, 2001), highlights that tests, in their nature, are mostly only able to assess lower order thinking skills.

Primary assessment has been particularly controversial in recent years, outlined by a timeline published in TES (2016b, p.6-9) of primary assessment descending into ‘chaos’ since the levels system was scrapped in 2013, replaced by unclear guidance for teacher assessment, the introduction of a KS1 SPAG test and the media highlighting the difficulty of SATS in 2016. These ‘massive, rushed and chaotic reforms have eroded confidence, consent and capacity in the system’ (Ward, 2016b, p.6). Similarly, Bullard (2016, p.9) notes the constantly mixed messages leading to ‘little confidence in the powers that be’. More recently, the negative effects of testing on children have caused the NUT to receive support from teachers for a possible SATS boycott next year (BBC, 2017). 89 per cent of teachers and 68 per cent of parents want SATS abolished, but 56 per cent of pupils want them to remain (Ward, 2016b, p.6-7). Ward (2016b, p.7) suggests this could be because children are less likely to question the school system and cannot conceive a world without SATS. Alternatively, it could indicate that the lack of confidence in teachers, and even parents, is not having a major effect on children; but more evidence would be needed to secure this.

SPAG has been an important part of the recent conversation around primary assessment. Literacy experts Debra Myhill and Pie Corbett have described the 2016 SPAG test as ‘too complicated’ and revealing ‘nothing about writing ability’ (Ward, 2016a, p.12). Therefore, SPAG will now be explored in more detail.

The History of SPAG

Throughout the mid twentieth century, the teaching of grammar was seen to hinder creativity and the development of writing quality and composition (DeBoer, 1959, p.417; Braddock et al, 1963, p.37; Watson, 2012, p.24; Payton, 2013). This opinion was held by some for many years:

For most people, nothing helps their writing so much as learning to ignore grammar as they write (Elbow, 1981, p.169).

However, Adoniou (2014) suggests the real problem may have come not from grammar itself, but from how it was taught. It ‘was a standalone subject’, seen not as a means to an end (improved literacy) but an end itself (Adoniou, 2014). This gap in grammar education could
have led to a lack of skills and subject knowledge and, therefore, confidence in many of today’s teachers (Payton, 2013; Adoniou, 2014). Less clear, is the impact this may have on the children they teach. Interestingly, the problems identified with the teaching of SPAG at that time seem to resonate with current issues, outlined above, where the political climate sees the end product as more important than the process.

It was not until the 1999 National Curriculum that SPAG was formally introduced. Spelling and punctuation were outlined clearly, but grammar was referred to as ‘language structure’. In KS1, pupils needed only ‘consider’ features of language structure, going on to be ‘taught’ them in KS2. ‘Language structure’ was a small section (nine lines for KS2) near the end of the writing guidance, which came after speaking, listening and reading guidance. This perhaps showed the priorities at the time; grammar being simply an element of English education amongst many other factors such as ‘composition’ and ‘planning and drafting’ (DfEE, 1999, p.42-59). Reinforcing these priorities, guidance from the National Literacy Strategy stated that:

The purpose of teaching grammar is not simply the naming of parts of speech, nor is it to provide arbitrary rules for ‘correct’ English (DfEE, 2000, p.7).

Today’s testing culture, in particular the introduction of the SPAG test, seems to undermine the above message by separating SPAG from writing and reducing the purpose of grammar to exactly what the DFEE thought it should not be in the above quote. Furthermore, the presence of a test solely on SPAG suggests that it is seen as a standalone subject. This could indicate a return to the problems of the mid twentieth century (Adoniou, 2014), outlined above.

The current National Curriculum states:

They should be taught to use the elements of spelling, grammar, punctuation and ‘language about language’ listed. This is not intended to constrain or restrict teachers’ creativity, but simply to provide the structure on which they can construct exciting lessons (DfE, 2013, p.16).

This seems to send quite a different message, and the fact that it should not ‘restrict teachers’ creativity’ had to be stipulated, suggests that it naturally might do so.

It is important to note that the 1999 National Curriculum and National Literacy Strategy were not without criticism (Watkinson, 2001; Joliffe, 2004). Some thought it did not allow for extended or creative writing and too strongly attempted to standardise education to raise attainment rather than seeing children as human beings and allowing flexibility (The Guardian, 1999). However, even if flawed in practice, it seems the message given in guidance documents by the government in 2000 supported teachers’ ideologies more so than today’s.

In 2010 (The National Archives, 2010), a national curriculum was sent out to schools ready to be introduced in 2011. In this document, the word grammar is not mentioned and the holistic curriculum was based on children as successful learners, confident individuals and responsible citizens. It demonstrated a cross curricular view with ‘areas of learning’ rather than subjects; English being ‘understanding English, communication and languages.’ It would have been interesting to find out how this curriculum, which seemingly aligned more strongly with teachers’ views, may have affected teachers’ confidence and motivation, and therefore children, in all curriculum areas.
More recently, as the education secretary has changed once again, there have been hints that teachers’ concerns may have been heard:

In a new consultation… Greening is seeking views on the scrapping of tests at the end of key stage 1 in favour of a newly designed baseline test in the reception years. (Whittaker, 2017)

Although it is unclear what the KS1 SATS would be replaced with, and this would not affect the contentious KS2 SATS, it could signal the beginning of larger changes to primary assessment.

Impact on practice

It may seem obvious that to raise standards we should rigorously teach SPAG and test frequently, but research suggests this is not in fact the best approach (Dombey, 2013, p.5). Raven-Ellison (2010, p.18) notes that ‘the reality is that the various pressures on schools to hit targets..., fulfil policies..., and conform to expectations can limit how creative schools can be’. Bullard (2016, p.9) confirms that this is true of his school, where creativity has been sacrificed in order to ‘teach more to the test than ever before’. Furthermore, research by Safford (2016) explains clearly how the teaching of SPAG has changed since the introduction of the test. Notably, the formality, frequency and explicitness of grammar teaching have increased (Safford, 2016, p.2). Also, the SPAG test strongly influences pedagogy when teaching grammar, including more ‘training’ to spot and identify particular aspects of grammar and memorising terminology (Safford, 2016, p.17).

The extent of the use of grammar terminology in primary schools today, due to the SPAG test, has been described as reducing writing to ‘writing-by-numbers’ (Rosen, 2016). He goes on to describe the SPAG test as:

Trying to herd the language into categories that don’t match meaning and function, and then using this as a means of herding children into categories that suit governments and make life miserable for children, parents and teachers (Rosen, 2016).

This is a strong opinion, but there is certainly disagreement and lack of proof as to whether explicit grammar teaching benefits children’s writing (Jones et al, 2012, p.1; Dombey, 2013, p.31; Safford, 2016, p.25). Brighouse (2017), states that ‘we are teaching children that how they write is more important that what they write’, which has caused the teaching of writing to have ‘very literally, lost the plot’. Many authors state that SPAG is more effectively taught when it is embedded in the context of writing (Jones et al, 2012, p.18; Dombey, 2013, p.31; Myhill et al, 2013, p.103-111; Horton and Bingle, 2014, p.13). However, the pressure to teach to the test, outlined above, could undermine this and make discrete teaching more tempting, thus showing how political pressures might undermine pedagogical research and impact on teachers’ confidence to teach.

Interestingly, in some of the only research which looks at how children are effected, Safford (2016, p.23) found that teachers were surprised to observe children enjoying learning SPAG and taking the test. This suggests inconsistencies between teachers’ and children’s feelings towards SPAG. That said, referring to SATS tests in general, Richardson (2017) reported a teacher’s experience of children crying during last year’s tougher tests. Perhaps, then, more
damage is done than can be easily observed for some children. In terms of teacher’s own skills, the SPAG test has meant that teachers’ subject knowledge has improved, increasing their confidence to teach grammar (Safford, 2016, p.29). This could indicate that current issues may be improving as teachers grow in confidence since the introduction of the SPAG test, but it would not be possible to examine this until more time has passed.

**Summary for research:**

From analysis of current literature, it appears that teacher confidence comprises not only of confidence in themselves including subject knowledge, but also confidence in the education system’s prioritisation of SPAG as a decontextualized goal. Therefore, three main research questions have arisen:

1. How confident are teachers in their own ability and subject knowledge to teach SPAG?
2. How does the political climate of education affect teacher confidence?
3. How do the above affect the teaching of SPAG?

**Methods**

The research was completed in a single form entry, village primary school in West Sussex, and sought the opinions of all teachers in the school. The research formed a case study of what could be described as a ‘bounded system’, being that it was carried out within one particular primary school (Ashley, 2012, p.102). Furthermore, of the five key rationales for case studies set out by Yin (2009, p.57-59, 52), this research used the primary school in question as a ‘representative’ or ‘typical’ case, as it sought to add to the body of knowledge in this area for primary schools in general. A case study allowed for an in depth examination of the topic (Savin-Baden and Major, 2013, p.151). However, although this case was intended to be ‘representative’, it should be acknowledged that it could not be entirely so, as primary schools and the opinions of teachers within them could vary considerably.

Concerned with the opinions, confidence and attitudes of teachers in the school, this research was of a qualitative nature, which has been defined as ‘social research that is aimed at investigating the way in which people make sense of their ideas and experiences’ (Savin-Baden and Major, 2013, p.11). Furthermore, qualitative research is aimed at generating theories rather than proving them (Coles and McGrath, 2010, p.57). In the context of the present research, it was aimed at generating a theory as to whether and how the teaching of SPAG is affected by teachers’ confidence in the area. In addition, quantitative analysis of the questionnaires implemented the use of a mixed methods approach in order to generate a more accurate and in depth understanding (Biesta, 2012, p.147). As mentioned above, questionnaires were used to initially gauge teacher’s thoughts, before interviewing to further understand their opinions, and correlating this with field notes from the placement. Each of these will now be explored in more detail.

Questionnaires were used to give an overview of the opinions of the teaching staff, but also to identify candidates for interview. Consequently, it was intended that all teachers in the school completed a questionnaire. Return rates and issues of time are often disadvantages of this method (Robson, 2007, p.81), so time was set aside in a staff meeting for the questionnaire to be introduced in order to maximise the likelihood of completion. It was important that the questionnaire clearly identified the teachers’ main ideas on the topic and
highlighted who might be suitable for interview, yet, questionnaires are often poorly constructed (Newby, 2014, p.299). Therefore, a pilot questionnaire was given to several teachers outside of the research school to identify any flaws, assess the effectiveness of the questions, and time taken to complete (Newby, 2014, p.334). Based on this, the questionnaire was adapted for the final participants. Questions on the pilot which involved more than one element were separated into different questions to ensure clarity. Some of the questions which involved circling certain options were altered. For example, the option of ‘yes’, ‘partly’, ‘no’ was changed into a one to five scale so that answers could be more specific. Furthermore, a question to find out teachers’ opinions on the effect on children’s learning and attitudes was added to further address this aspect of the research question. All questionnaires were analysed for the research findings, but those which showed strong opinions on the topic were chosen to be taken forward as the basis for interviews.

Using the questionnaire responses produced a purposive sample of two candidates for interview - purposeful interactions, used for a deep understanding of a person’s thoughts and experiences (Mears, 2012, p.170-171). The participants were chosen because they showed the strongest opinions in the area and the teachers had significant experience with, and had been directly affected by the SPAG tests. The interviews took a one-to-one, semi-structured approach because the main issues to be covered were known to the researcher, whilst the opinions of the teachers were not. Subsequently, interviews contained a series of open ended questions to allow the freedom and flexibility to gather the respondent’s views (Coles and McGrath, 2010, p.103). This more natural approach helped to put the interviewer and interviewee at ease, producing more informative answers (Robson, 2007, p.74). However, without being completely structured, interviews ran the risk of becoming distracted or irrelevant, so the prompts were used to keep interviews productive (Robson, 2007, p.74; Coles and McGrath, 2010, p.103). Similarly, time constraints can be problematic for interviews, so these were arranged with ample notice, during a time convenient for each teacher. It should also be acknowledged that the relationship of the interviewer to the interviewees was one of a colleague in the school, which could have influenced the answers given. Consequently, the nature and purpose of the research was made clear to the candidates, and this fact acknowledged in analysis of the data.

Field notes were also used to support and cross reference data generated through questionnaires and interviews, as an unobtrusive method. These were taken throughout the placement informally as relevant information was heard, as an unobtrusive way to collect the most natural results (Savin-Baden and Major, 2013, p.339). Notes were also taken during conversations with teachers, and on the school’s routines and practices for the teaching of SPAG, such as how it was done discreetly or within literacy lessons. This method could be described as solo, insider fieldwork, as research was undertaken independently, in the context of working as a student teacher (Savin-Baden and Major, 2013, p.343). This had the advantage of producing detailed knowledge about the setting, but the potential ‘blurring of boundaries between the researcher and the researched’ could produce ‘unhelpful bias’ from a subjective viewpoint (Savin-Baden and Major, 2013, p.343). This would, therefore, have to be considered throughout the analysis. Although this field work was known to all teachers, and therefore considered ‘overt’ (Savin-Baden and Major, 2013, p.344), it was done informally within the context of general routines, in order to maximise reliability of results. Any notes taken on teachers’ conversations were made known to the teachers involved and permission given to use what had been said for the research.
Overall, practitioner based research, with the goal of self-improvement, inevitably has a positive impact on others (Coles and McGrath, 2010, p.84), and these methods contributed to the research being done, as well as the teachers’ reflections on and understanding of their own practice.

**Findings and Analysis**

**Teachers are comfortable with their subject knowledge:**

The teachers in the school studied felt comfortable with their subject knowledge, with scores out of five ranging from 3-5. However, two participants had taken English to degree level, whilst another two were the English leads for the school, so would have had a high level of training and knowledge in that specific area. This high proportion of English speciality, and therefore confidence in SPAG knowledge, may not translate to a wider sample. All participants stated that they had improved their own subject knowledge through various means such as revision, self-teaching, staff meetings or courses. An interviewee commented that teachers’ subject knowledge is improving with time because ‘teachers are conscientious and they have to improve.’ These findings are in agreement with Safford (2016, p.29) who found that teachers’ subject knowledge had improved since the introduction of SPAG tests as a matter of necessity. The high level of English specialism in the school studied could also mean that in school, continuing professional development, such as staff meetings, was of a high quality and could have had a positive effect on the other teachers’ subject knowledge.

**Expectations for SPAG are too high:**

Figure 2 shows scores out of five for teachers’ agreement with current methods for and focus on SPAG. These scores indicate a lack of confidence in current policy. Based on answers which elaborated on this, the reason for some agreement is that participants felt that SPAG is useful and important, but that the extent and level to which children must learn SPAG content is too high. One teacher commented, ‘the year six test is pitched too high and way beyond anything a year six child can usefully apply to their writing.’ The only opinion which indicated the current level of subject knowledge could be acceptable, stated that the current expectations could be a ‘good target’ but should have been gradually built up to. This reflects the views of Debra Myhill and Pie Corbett - that the SPAG tests are too complicated (Ward, 2016a, p.12). During interviews, one interviewee explained that the grammar and punctuation in years three and four is at an acceptable level which is ‘relevant to what the children need to know, and can still be taught through text writing’. However, they went on to describe that what children then need to know for the year six SATS test is ‘so far out of their abilities as far as writing goes’ and ‘you may as well make the children sit a French test’. This indicated a lack of consistency throughout the curriculum in expectation for each year group.
All participants thought that the current focus for SPAG, namely the SATS test, is not helpful for writing. An interviewee described the testing as ‘utterly ridiculous’, whilst three participants specifically expressed that creativity in writing is stunted by the way SPAG is currently focussed on. Another interviewee stated that ‘flair’, ‘style’ and ‘imagination’ in writing have gone, and it has become a ‘tick list’. They went on to explain that it is very difficult to find real texts which demonstrate the features year six pupils need to include in their writing, because ‘that’s not how people actually write’. These opinions consolidate Brighouse’s (2017) argument that the teaching of writing has ‘very literally, lost the plot’ through a focus on how, rather than what children write. This agreement amongst the teachers could be because all participants were teachers at the same, small school and shared values as well as conversations on the subject. However, their opinions align with literature which questions the contribution such a prevalent focus on SPAG has to writing quality (Jones et al, 2012, p.1; Dombey, 2013, p.31; Rosen, 2016; Safford, 2016, p.25; Brighouse, 2017). One interviewee commented that writing did need to get better at the outset of the new curriculum, but the focus needs to be on writing itself, and not on ‘their ability to spot an exclamation mark’ in a test.

The teaching of SPAG has been affected:

It has been stated that SPAG is more effectively taught when it is embedded in the context of writing (Jones et al, 2012, p.18; Dombey, 2013, p.31; Myhill et al, 2013, p.103-111; Horton and Bingle, 2014, p.13). Questionnaire responses agreed with this, stating that ‘it should be more focussed on language in context’ and that ‘an integrated and applied manner contributes to writing quality’. Despite this, participants commented that they teach in a more discreet way, and 4/5 participants said they would teach SPAG differently if there was no test. One interviewee explained that they would like to use more creative ways into writing which help children to show imagination and creativity, but that ‘that is not what the government want to judge.’ Another interviewee explained that there is enormous pressure from the tests because of school league tables and the focus that Ofsted place on data and results. Evidently, political pressures have altered teachers’ methods of teaching English as a whole, to incorporate an agenda for SPAG, despite their opinions of how it should be taught. This corroborates literature which found that the teaching of SPAG has changed since the introduction of the test, increasing in formality, frequency and explicitness (Safford 2016, p.2). The participant who stated that they would not change their teaching methods if there were no test was observed teaching. This indicated that their answer could have been because they simply do not allow their literacy teaching to be overly effected by political pressure. However, pressure on teachers to change their teaching methods is likely to be felt more so in year groups which are directly affected by the SATS tests. For example, one interviewee commented, ‘year six is becoming a pretty undesirable job’. Consequently, not allowing their teaching to be affected may not be equally possible for all teachers.

During interviews, one participant discussed how the teaching of SPAG had changed over time. They noted that during the literacy hour (DfEE, 2000), children’s writing suffered because they looked at small chunks of text in terms of their features, and did not receive the opportunity for extended reading or writing of whole texts. The pressure teachers feel to change their teaching style because of the SPAG test could result in this more prescribed and discreet teaching, as in the literacy hour, becoming more common. The possible negative effects of this which were explored earlier such as decreasing imagination and creativity, mean that children’s writing quality could once again suffer due to political policy pressurising teaching styles. The interviewee went on to describe that the National Strategy responded
well to this and supported a much more integrated approach, but that the introduction of the current National Curriculum by Michael Gove, ‘wrecked everything.’ Another interviewee stated:

I wonder why we are teaching this curriculum because it is not producing better writers; it is just producing children who know that something is called a fronted adverbial which they will never use again.

They later stated that as far as they could see, anyone who is knowledgeable in the field of education ‘doesn’t agree with this system’ so questioned where it had come from. This indicates a feeling that teachers’ opinions were not consulted in the creation of the current National Curriculum. Clearly, at least in the school studied, there is a lack of confidence in the current English curriculum and its emphasis on the SPAG test.

One questionnaire participant commented that ‘it is very hard to teach SPAG in an exciting manner’. This could be because of the pressure to teach it discreetly and to the test, rather than more integrated approaches which could increase creativity. This is supported by the literature which found that pressures of the test ‘can limit how creative schools can be’ (Raven-Ellison, 2010, p.18), and that it is necessary to ‘teach more to the test than ever before’ (Bullard, 2016, p.9). Perhaps without the presence of a SPAG test, teachers would find it easier to integrate SPAG in a creative way. This was further consolidated in the study, through field notes of a conversation between teachers in the staff room. Teacher A explained how a child had written a very simple, yet very effective poem which showed deep understanding, but all they could think about was ‘that it wouldn’t tick any assessment boxes’. Teacher B replied, ‘I really hate where we are at the moment where everything creative has been squeezed out.’ It is evident that the pressure of the SPAG test is having a negative effect on teachers’ confidence in policy makers and their priorities for English, as well as teachers’ morale. If this is a wider issue beyond the school studied, which literature would suggest it is, then this could be a contributing factor to current issues of teacher retention (DfE, 2015; Harding, 2015; Weale, 2015; Press Association, 2016).

When asked for opinions on how the current testing of writing and SPAG could be improved, and interviewee discussed ‘comparative assessment’. They had become aware of this through teaching communities such as websites and blogs, which indicates that many more teachers outside the school studied, have shown interest in this method. Comparative assessment involves children’s writing being assessed through comparison against the class as a whole, not against national set criteria. Another interviewee stated that they would read a child’s writing which showed ‘amazing flair’, knowing that they were a very able writer, but it would not ‘tick enough of the boxes’, whilst another piece of writing could be quite ‘mundane’ yet tick more boxes. Therefore, comparative assessment could respond to many of the concerns outlined so far and help to encourage creativity in writing. It would also place more trust in teachers’ judgement which could help with some of the issues outlined above, of morale and retention in the profession. However, it would need careful moderation processes to ensure accurate assessment across different schools. An interviewee stated that they do not think the curriculum or assessments will change soon because of how recently there has been drastic change, but commented ‘although everyone is so anti it, how can it not?’ Recent information about the new education secretary seeking views on the dissolution of KS1 SATS (Whittaker, 2017) show that some change could be on the horizon.
Teachers think children could be affected:

One interviewee stated that teachers generally do not let their children know how they feel about the SPAG test. However, another stated that they ‘cover up to a point’ but have to be honest because the children ‘know it is not interesting’ and question when they will ever use the knowledge. Therefore, there has to be an element of the children understanding that they simply need to learn SPAG content for the SATS test. Questionnaire responses stated that children are ‘uninspired and bored’ by SPAG and that they ‘don’t enjoy it, due to the amount of pressure that the tests create.’ One response noted that ‘some enjoy the learning and testing process but most don’t’. This could impact their motivation to learn the content, but also may inflict pressure of the importance of SATS. Furthermore, one interviewee stated that some children receive a lot of pressure from their parents and do intense revision at home or receive private tutoring. This contrasts with Safford’s (2016) finding that teachers observed children enjoying learning SPAG and taking the test. This may vary from school to school depending on teachers’ honesty about their own feelings or the extent to which political pressure affects their practice. The school studied did not express observations as negative as that reported by Richardson (2017) of a teacher’s experience of children crying during last year’s tougher tests. However, opinions in the school studied were that the overall effect of the SPAG test on children is a negative one. Further observations of and discussions with children themselves would be needed to consolidate this theory.

Conclusions and recommendations

This research sought to discover how teachers’ confidence affected their teaching of SPAG. The project has found that the main issue for teachers when teaching SPAG is not a lack of confidence in their subject knowledge, as this can be, and has been improved over time. More seriously, teachers demonstrate a lack of confidence in the political context of SPAG and the resulting SATS test, which they feel puts them and the children in their class under enormous pressure. This is part of a wider problem of the testing culture inherent in today’s education system. Teachers feel that this focus on tests is detrimental to children, who need a richer and more relevant education based on creativity and life skills. It is felt that the level of knowledge needed for the SPAG test is too difficult. Furthermore, this level of knowledge is unnecessary for the age of the children as it cannot be meaningfully applied to their writing and causes teachers to have to teach to the test. Consequently, the teaching of SPAG has become more discreet and focussed on the specific knowledge needed for the test and less linked in with the children’s writing itself. Teachers in the school felt that children’s writing is becoming less imaginative and creative, and that even when writing is creative and shows ‘flair’, this does not satisfy government targets, causing teachers to question the government’s priorities for writing and education in general. Teachers feel that this could be having an adverse effect on children’s attitudes to writing, as well as the tests causing some children significant stress.

This research set out to discover whether the lack of confidence shown by teachers was due to the recently increased level of difficulty in SPAG meaning that teachers’ subject knowledge was not yet able to meet the needs of the test. If this had been the case, then it would have indicated that teachers’ confidence would improve over time, as their subject knowledge increased by schools’ use of continuing professional development for their staff. It became clear, however that there were much deeper and more political concerns from teachers.
surrounding the subject of SPAG. This discovery means that the real source of these issues is clearer.

Going forward, schools should continue to keep up with their continuing professional development in SPAG so that teachers feel as confident as possible in their own subject knowledge. Furthermore, within the current educational climate, it is suggested that teachers should work on finding a balance between the knowledge needed for the SPAG test, and finding time to value and encourage creativity and motivation for writing, so that political policy does not override their philosophies. Schools should support their teachers in implementing a rigorous SPAG curriculum which, when necessary, is taught discretely, but wherever possible is embedded in the context of reading and writing. Focus should also be given to ensuring the discreet teaching of SPAG is as interesting and meaningful as possible. Suggestions on teaching social media sites suggest contexts such as listening to examples of grammar in popular music (Grammarsaurus, 2016) or correcting the grammar and punctuation of celebrity tweets (Cotter, 2016). Schools should have clear dialogue and communication with other schools about how they are tackling these issues, and ways they have found to build preparation for the SPAG test into a rich and varied curriculum.

However, the lack of confidence in the government’s current educational policy and priorities means that the bigger solution to this problem needs to be at a governmental and policy level. Accordingly, this research forms part of an ongoing body of knowledge, and contributes to making the voices of teachers known, hoping that notice will be taken, and changes made. Teachers’ voices on the political state of education have been made known through forums such as social media, news and the National Union of Teachers (National Union of Teachers, 2016; Richardson, 2017). It has already been stated that the new education secretary is ‘seeking views on the scrapping of tests at the end of key stage 1’ (Whittaker, 2017), so more changes may follow. Consequently, at a school level, teachers should continue to state their opinions clearly and make their voices heard in different ways.

This project has summarised the views of teachers in one school, contributing to a growing argument on what modern education should achieve. Similar research could be done in other schools to build up the reliability and generalisations that can be made. The question of how teachers’ confidence affects their teaching has been successfully explored in the research school. More research could be done on the effect that this has on children themselves, to give deeper insight into this area.

Currently, teachers and children work to achieve grammar, but hopefully in the future, the emphasis will shift so that grammar can work to help them achieve.

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