



The National Association of  
School-Based Teacher Trainers

## **NASBTT Opinion Piece**

**Emma Hollis**

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### **Are children put off teaching by the ‘sausage factory’ approach to their education?**

You can certainly feel the momentum around efforts to ‘solve’ (if that is the right word) the desperate teacher recruitment crisis in the UK.

The ‘Strengthening QTS and improving career progression for teachers’ consultation, which seats proposals around Initial Teacher Training (ITT) within a wider strategy around recruitment, retention, workload and professional development, gives us a direction. And NASBTT’s behind-the-scenes involvement in developments like the Early Career Framework, Recruitment and Retention Strategy and Fitness to Teach reflect my own belief that this government is committed to on-the-ground action.

Up until recently, we have perhaps missed out on a harder ‘lobbying’ approach to change, but TES’ Let Them Teach campaign, calling on the government to support adding the whole teaching profession to the ‘shortage occupation list’ which gives higher priority for visas for international teachers, has thrust this issue into the public eye. We can only hope that a sensible outcome results from this, and indeed that wider perceptions around teaching return to where they should be: that this is a great profession, where the rewards (including the issue of fair pay) far outweigh any potential challenges.

So we are making good progress, but there is a ‘but’. A big ‘but’. A huge problem remains around exams and high accountability. Over recent months we have seen Nick Gibb suggesting that exam stress could be solved by making children take more tests earlier. Mr Gibb faced criticism from MPs on the health and education select committees, who said that excessive testing was causing mental health problems in schools. Emma Hardy, a Labour MP, said that high-achieving girls were “breaking”, and Sarah Wollaston, the Tory chairwoman of the health committee and a doctor, said that young people had reported exam pressures as a key cause of mental ill health. And children still in primary school are being labelled failures as a direct result of the high stakes SATs tests.

It is clear the government is committed to the exam and high-accountability culture that has developed in schools, as a result of its own policy, over the past 10 years or so. Much has been said about the ‘narrowing of the curriculum’ and criticism has been levelled at systems which result in ‘teaching to the test’ instead of transmitting a passion for a subject. Schools and teachers are not to blame. They are under immense pressure from above and face insurmountable workload and stress overload. Ask a teacher what and how they want to teach and it will often be very different from what, and how, they have to teach to meet ever-more demanding expectations from government.

Schools and teachers are judged on the outcome of tests and not on the wider culture and commitment they have to the children they teach. League tables can make or break a school with no consideration having been given to the context in which they are working. Exam

factories produce adults who can pass exams, but experience suggests they do not produce adults with the passion for a subject which they want to pass on to the next generation. Instead teachers are turning away from education and into other, perhaps more creative, workplaces.

One angle that is being missed in the current recruitment rhetoric is the need to look through the eyes of today's primary and secondary school pupils and what they see in their classroom. My concern is this could be impacting on the future desire to teach amongst the children of today. Are children experiencing a 'sausage factory' approach to education which is turning them off ever returning to the classroom as adults?

Research published by TES in January showed that whilst one fifth of UK primary pupils aspire to be a sportsperson, teaching is the second most popular career choice. Whilst teaching was only chosen by 10.91% of the 13,000 children who took part, this remains incredibly positive.

So, my challenge would be what is changing from these apparently great ambitions around becoming a teacher for primary school children aged 7-11, and applications for teacher training programmes some 10-14 years later?

Is it their growing awareness that, actually, when children go through their school journey and also do their research online, prospective students are simply dumbstruck by the negativity that surrounds the profession? They will see the personal stories of teachers being unable to afford their own home, of taking work home in the evenings, weekends and holidays, the barriers around performance-related pay, the accountability around data and the 'crisis' in schools. There is very little good news out there – and this must surely be the real nub of the issue if we are to 'solve' the long-term challenge.

One for us all to ponder over the summer break.

Emma Hollis is Executive Director of the National Association of School-Based Teacher Trainers (NASBTT)

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NASBTT represents the interests of schools-led teacher training provision in relation to the development and implementation of national policy developments. Our members include SCITT providers, School Direct Lead Schools, Teaching Schools, HEIs as well as a range of other organisations involved in the education and professional development of teachers. We have 195 members representing almost 7,000 individual trainees.

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**Media Contact:**

Phil Smith

NASBTT PR consultant

Office: 01778 218180

Mobile: 07866 436159

Email: [phil@philsmithcommunications.co.uk](mailto:phil@philsmithcommunications.co.uk)