

April 2, 2007 Times

## Class like 'boot camp', teachers' leader says

Alexandra Freaan

Primary schools are more like boot camps than a place for learning for 10 and 11-year-olds, who are drilled to take national tests to the point of exhaustion, a union leader says today.

Mary Bousted, general secretary of the Association of Teachers and Lecturers, is to tell the union's annual conference in Bournemouth that the system of national testing and school league tables is failing a generation.

Hundreds of thousands of Year 6 children are spending hours every day preparing for their national Key Stage 2, or Sats, tests, in English, maths and science next month.

"This is not education, this is training and the consequences are catastrophic," she says. "They lead to a period of exhaustion, not only for the teacher, but also for the pupils who are route-marched through to Level 4.

"We know that real learning does not take place in boot camp Year 6 classes."

Dr Bousted will also use her speech to call for Ofsted, the schools watchdog, to be stripped of its powers of inspection so that the job of monitoring school performance can be handed to independent advisers working for the local authority.

She believes that Ofsted's main aim to improve school standards has been a complete failure, but accepts that Ofsted is now the most influential force in English schools.

"The driving force behind what happens in schools in England today is not the Government, it is Ofsted.

"Ministers' words are wasted unless what they want is included in the Ofsted inspection framework. The Ofsted inspection process drives the education system at every level," she says.

Despite this, Ofsted is failing to improve school results. National tests show, for example, that between the ages of 11 (the last year of primary school) and 12 (the first year of secondary school) more than a quarter of pupils make no apparent progress at all.

Dr Bousted will praise Tony Blair's investment in education, but criticise him for a "pick-and-mix" approach that has created an array of new types of schools that do nothing towards giving poorer families more choice.

I was initially quite disappointed when I couldn't get my son into one of the local higher-performing schools as we couldn't afford the catchment premium. He goes to a nearby school now which takes most of its pupils from the local council estates. Its league table performance is low, but I've realised that this is because the teachers refuse to focus on SATs and allow pupils to learn broadly and enjoy a range of activities. I am glad now that he doesn't go to a school with such a narrow definition of learning and would encourage other parents to look beyond league tables when choosing a school.

Georgina, Manchester,

I took my son to Brazil for five weeks just before his SATS with his teacher's approval. "Oh, that sounds much more educational," she said, good woman. SATs don't mean anything anyway. Once you've got your GCSEs no one wants to know your SATs, once you're in to uni, nobody cares about

any qualification before that. Let your kids relax and learn what they want when they are young. At the time he was not a particularly keen reader and not so hot at maths. He got mainly threes. And then later he got interested in studying and got into medical school. Encourage your kids not to care about the stupid SATs. Children's eventual achievement cannot be predicted from early testing. It's a lie.

Ruth, London,

I think that Sean, Southampton, may have missed the point - this is not "Boot Camp" it is more like "Brainwashing Camp".

I teach in Yr 6 in Southampton, and the children in my class are like zombies. We sacrifice the National Curriculum (we retain RE and PE through law), and we drill facts and figures that relate to Numeracy, Literacy and Science into the children, hoping that we get them to "peak" on the week of the SATs. Some of them don't, and I have children who appear to be regressing. They are taught to be "safe" rather than adventurous with their work. None of this is through my choice, it is to keep the Headteacher and Governors happy with improved places in the league tables - and woe betide the teacher who doesn't produce - it doesn't even benefit the children because the Secondary Schools know that these results are not true indicators of ability and the children are re-examined. It makes the Primary teachers look silly because we send them parrots, not learners.

Year 6 Teacher, Southampton, UK

My sons school not only drop all non core activities, but also lengthen the school day from a 3.20 finish to 4.30 for two days a week.

He brings home mountains of revision and homework (that is very rarely marked) and is also expected to go on-line to a site called Sam Learning (in his own time), the school can also monitor their time on Sam Learning and last week in Assembly the children who had not been on this site enough were named and shamed (even the one's without computers at home) - surely its the school who should be ashamed for putting 11 year olds under so much pressure!!

The schools have had 4 years to get Y6's to the level they think they should be at - so why leave it to the last few months!

Joanne, Rotherham, UK

Whats wrong with boot camp! It teaches discipline, structure and achievement. With peer pressure becoming a large part of kids growing up today, it is important the correct influence is given so peers can influence 'correct' behavior rather than the constant battle against the one or two in each class causing disruption. This reverses the roll allowing the kids themselves to fight the problem. The military have been very effective in their principles and achieving goals for our country and many others. We need to change the attitude of children, not necessarily through boot camp but apply the principles to help provide the correct influence at that early important stage of development.

Sean, Southampton, UK

Whilst I am a marker and do not wish to put myself out of work, may I state what is very un obvious ( the mistake is deliberate, by the way). I mark KS2 English. Parents worry about spelling because it was used as a stick to beat them with as a child. I'm sure Joyce in Warwickshire is focusing her fears on that, perhaps as well as the reading test part. Spelling takes up only 7 marks: we do not mark for spelling in any other part of the 5 stage test. Handwriting takes up 3. Reading takes up 50% but the questions are worded and set out in such a way that a struggling reader should be able to give most of the answers a try. The writing focuses on answering the task - not grammar. What is the question

asking? We can mark something if it's there, if it's not we can't. I think the tests are fair to the children: it's the parent's emphasis on the results that is unfair. Any decent teacher should be able to tell you that. Kids don't try if they think they'll fail. Think about it, would you?

Carlyle Braden, Croydon, U.K.

I was horrified to find that my daughters school essentially dropped ALL non core activities (i.e anything that was "fun") for about a term and a half when they did KS2. Talk about putting children off learning for life - you really could not do better if you tried.

tim, uxbridge,

My son is in year 6 and came home last week with a 28 page document that he has to learn for his SATs. This document consists mainly of information that I did not learn until I was at secondary school by which time I could read and write well.

A fortnight ago I received an assessment of my son's capabilities and he is two years behind the expected level in literacy and four years behind in numeracy. He was assessed at level 1 in literacy and level 3 in Science and Maths at Key Stage 1. These results confirm that he has above average ability but is hindered by dyslexia, a fact that the school is only just recognising now.

The teachers have agreed that he will not cope with the SATs but persist in giving him handouts that he will not be able to learn in time. My experience more than bears out what Dr Boustead is saying.

Joyce , Warwickshire,

Endless tests keep up the illusion of high standards and give everyone something to do. It is necessary to impose this artificial discipline because the fundamentals are not there. It does have huge costs, but the likely result of abandoning the tests will be worse.

Malcolm McLean, Bradford, UK

How very true this is! Despite voiced concerns by myself, my 11 year old son 'worked' for his SATS last year solidly from September through to May. Any actual learning took a poor second place to the constant drilling for 'good' results. He's a bright boy and would have performed well ANYWAY but it was deemed that he and his classmates would be worked and stressed to maintain the school's status on the performance tables. This is the reality of Year 6 in many, many schools and it's about time it changed.

Trudi Tilley, Saltburn-by-the-Sea,