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- Tech
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- Video
- Politics
- Investigations
- Obits
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- Defence
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- Celebrities
- Weird
- University Education
- Clearing
- University Course Finder
- Student Life
- Primary
- Secondary
- School League Tables
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Leading academic criticises 'Victorian'-style curriculum

Children risk missing out on the arts, humanities and sport at primary school because of a “neo-Victorian” focus on the three-Rs, according to one of the country’s leading experts on early education.



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Prof Robin Alexander criticised the new National Curriculum, saying it placed too much emphasis on the three-Rs. Photo: PA



By **Graeme Paton**, Education Editor

2:34PM BST 24 Sep 2013

175 Comments

A new National Curriculum introduced by the Coalition will narrow pupils' horizons by failing to give them the "knowledge, skills and experience" needed in all subjects, it was claimed.

Robin Alexander, fellow of Wolfson College, Cambridge, and professor of education at York University, said that literacy and numeracy provided a vital foundation for children's future lives.

But speaking in central London, he insisted the revised curriculum for under-11s – to be introduced next year – overemphasised their importance at the expense of other core disciplines, suggesting the arts and humanities were being "left to chance".

Prof Alexander also criticised the Government's drive to make young children "secondary ready", insisting that primary education was an important stage in its own right and should not be seen as a mere stepping stone towards secondary school.

It represents his most high-profile comments since the publication of the landmark Cambridge Primary Review in 2009 – a 600-page report edited by Prof Alexander following a six-year inquiry into the state of primary education in England.

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A new Cambridge Primary Review Trust – based at York University – has now been established to build on the work of the inquiry and help raise standards in primary schools across the country.

Speaking at the launch on Monday, Prof Alexander said the trust would seek to develop teaching in the face of a “neo-Victorian” National Curriculum.

“While primary schools must and do insist on the foundational importance of literacy and numeracy, they should also lay those other foundations – in science, the arts, the humanities, in physical, emotional and moral development and in lived experience - that in their way are no less important for young children’s future learning and lives,” he said.

The new curriculum makes a distinction between the “core” subjects of English, maths and science – which are covered in depth – and shorter specifications for “foundation” subjects such as history, geography, languages, art, physical education, music and design and technology. It will be taught from September 2014.

But addressing an audience of teachers and academics, Prof Alexander said an equal focus on all subjects would “make children more truly ‘secondary ready’ than if they do the three-Rs and little else”.

He added: “The review has consistently argued against the neo-Victorian opposition of the ‘basics’ on one hand and the rest on the other, which the revised National Curriculum perpetuates, sadly, in its sharper-than-ever distinction between the ‘core’ and foundation subjects.

“Such stratification is both educationally inappropriate and pedagogically



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counterproductive.

"This two-tier curriculum undervalues not just the true cultural and economic worth of the so-called non-core subjects but also the evidence from research and inspection showing how learning in one area enhances learning in others."

The new trust is being sponsored by Pearson, the education and publishing company, and will provide support services and teaching materials for primary schools.

A Department for Education spokeswoman said: "It is utterly unacceptable that so many children leave primary school without a firm grounding in the basics of English, maths and science. That is why our rigorous new primary curriculum focuses on these vital subjects.

"Of course we expect primaries to teach beyond just English, maths and science. That is why we are giving teachers more freedom than ever before, allowing them to shape lessons to meet the needs of the pupils they know best."

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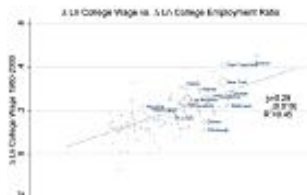
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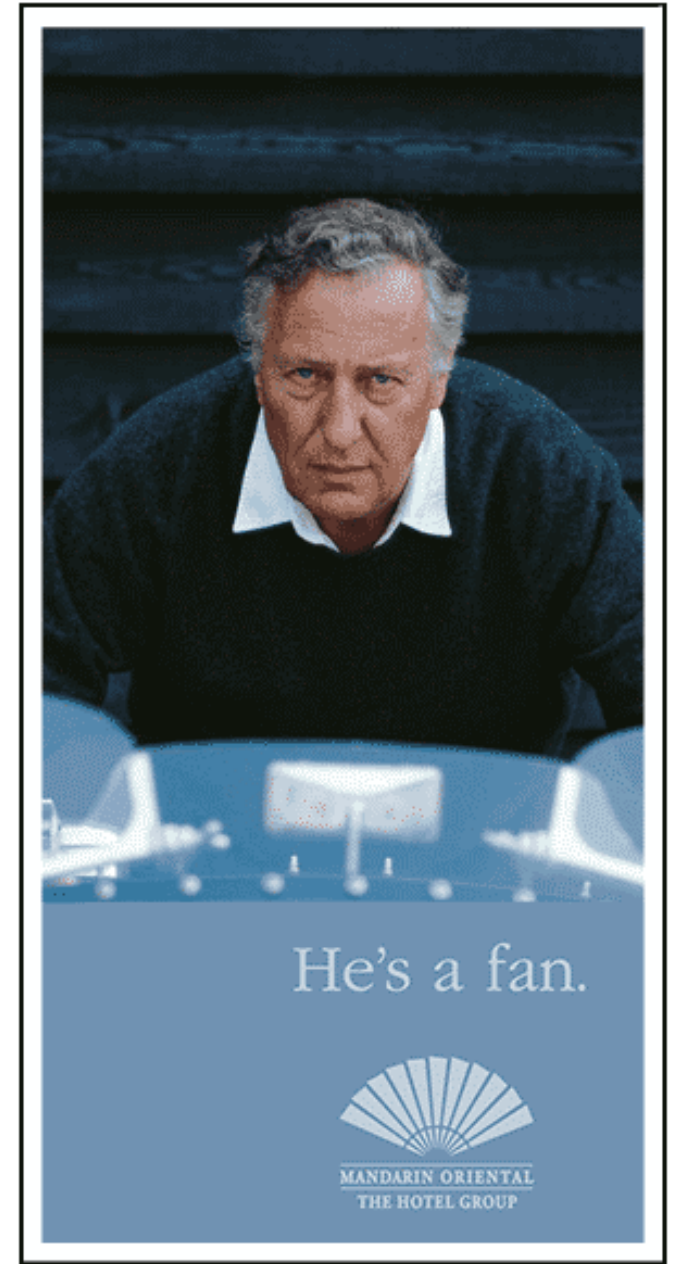
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burniea · 10 months ago

What is needed is common sense, and one is not going to find that in politicians and ac



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I would think that British history is a core subject and would agree it is on par with science. Arts and culture are important too and can be helpful in making the core classes more interesting.

And after a certain age, students should begin to be exposed to more varied curriculum and untapped interests, whether that interest is art, music, welding etc.

^ | v · Share ›



lordlindley · 10 months ago

I nearly didn't read it when I saw the word 'academic' but I continued. I was right another reason the very reason the changes have been brought in. The subjects are fine & varied for university later studies. We are fed up of degrees in general science & sports journalism. We need more citizens. We have no place for honours degree Jeremy Kyle watchers.

1 ^ | v · Share ›



limeyexpat · 10 months ago

well at least it was taught in English

2 ^ | v · Share ›



schoolswot · 10 months ago

Alexander made another point not noted above.

The respected academic, who led the Cambridge Primary Review – a three-year analysis of education published in 2009 - attacked the current "discourse of derision" in which the group who disagree with its ideas was the real "enemy of progress".


Well quite.

I notice that Alexander himself has been attacked on here by someone who posts on C

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(realtor.com)

All part of the "I'm right, you're wrong" slapdown practice of Gove, his Spads, lobby. You comes up with anything that they disapprove of.

Nasty stuff.

5 ^ | v • Share ›



johnbald → schoolswot • 10 months ago

I criticised Robin Alexander's primary review when it appeared, and notice that you even read it! As it happens, they loaned me a copy, but you don't have to pay for Cambridge Education Faculty's excellent library, which has free access. And I'm approach is right. I want to see evidence in terms of improvements in children's understanding - real evidence, not box ticking. There is no evidence in this review anyone that what it proposes is worthwhile. A collection of opinions is not evidence "pedagogy", which is just a long word for teaching.

The Cambridge primary review is so much hot air, and I'll happily debate this with

^ | v • Share ›



schoolswot → johnbald • 10 months ago

@johnbald

But you're not just criticizing his review but him as a person and his entire

Your opening line was this:

"Oh, what a surprise. I look at Robin Alexander's record, and ask when he did anything."

You then gave us the link which could have told you that he taught for 13

How is that not playing the man and not the ball?

It doesn't actually matter that I haven't read the Primary review since it was your approach that is so similar to others around Gove right now which is criticizing.

2 | v • Share ›



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johnbald → schoolswot · 10 months ago

I am not criticising Professor Alexander as a person. I don't know what he taught, not what posts he held. I'm saying, having read h it is not based on evidence of what makes teaching most effective of children's knowledge, skills and understanding. In particular, it how to teach reading and numeracy. I'm saying, in short, that he couplet:

"Only for telling a man he was wrong,
Two lovely black eyes."

^ | v · Share ›



Guest → schoolswot · 10 months ago

Do you think it was deliberate and co-ordinated? JB is a regular poster on the G rougher ride than here (I know how he feels).

^ | v · Share ›



johnbald → Guest · 10 months ago

For the record, I post on the Guardian's website because a lot of teacher interested in the same things. I get occasional abuse, some of which is I don't expect an easy run there as a professed Conservative. I also get so people sometimes agree strongly with what I say.

^ | v · Share ›



Guest → johnbald · 10 months ago

Perhaps we should swap?

^ | v · Share ›



schoolswot → Guest · 10 months ago

Don't think this was co-ordinated as it doesn't seem to have attracted at this one seems to have a virulent dislike of Labour and anyone who might them.

I've never read Alexander's review (I'd have to pay for it!) but I can't believe it's worthwhile in it.

^ | v · Share ›



johnbald → schoolswot · 10 months ago

I give Labour credit for improving the education of children in care buildings. Otherwise, most of what they have done is delusory, and examination scores. As a Conservative, and former member of the Conservative Party, I'd like to see a nice note welcoming me from Estelle Morris - I don't expect to do

However, as you're arguing about a book you haven't read, there

^ | v · Share ›



Guest → schoolswot · 10 months ago

I gather the whole of academia is one great Marxist conspiracy.

^ | v · Share ›



johnbald → Guest · 10 months ago

Then look further, as this is certainly not my view. Some academic evidence, and long may it continue. It was academics who carried Clackmannanshire research on phonics, for example.

^ | v · Share ›



schoolswot → johnbald · 10 months ago

@johnbald

But it's certainly the view of Gove and those who operate around

That was the point that Alexander was making.

Valid or not? What is it he called them...the Blob?

1 ^ | v · Share ›



johnbald → schoolswot · 10 months ago

That was Chris Woodhead's phrase. I prefer to call them the Oc

tentacles and suckers in most areas of education, with infinite ca
regeneration.

^ | v · Share ›



wimsb · 10 months ago

Arts? Sh1te by Emin and Hirst? Nothing by Money, Holman Hunt, Michaelangelo or Tu

Humanities? How wonderful multiculturally vibrant Islam is?

Why we should all vote Labour?

Music? How to compose rap and hip hop?

Science? Here's a video of an experiment because the Health and Safety cretins say tl
risk assessments before I can do anything, limiting any classroom spontaneity.

Stick to the 3 R's

1 ^ | v · Share ›



Guest → wimsb · 10 months ago

Who on earth is Money?

1 ^ | v · Share ›



germanspy → Guest · 10 months ago

Bamber

Monet?

^ | v · Share ›



Guest → germanspy · 10 months ago

Well, obviously I know THAT. Blinking phonics, you see?

^ | v · Share ›



schoolswot → wimsb · 10 months ago

Was this for a competition to see how many cliches you could use?



Gettingoldernow → wimsb · 10 months ago

No. Just reform the Arts and Humanities to what they once were. Quite as valuable as utilitarian subjects.

1 ^ | v · Share ›



Guest → Gettingoldernow · 10 months ago

I don't often agree with you, but hear, hear!

^ | v · Share ›



Gettingoldernow → Guest · 10 months ago

We may agree on more than you think.

^ | v · Share ›



Guest → Gettingoldernow · 10 months ago

That looks somehow sinister!

^ | v · Share ›



wimsb · 10 months ago

He's part of the problem. Churning out the same moronic message as his crypto Marxist destroyed education in the late 70's onwards.

1 ^ | v · Share ›



regnizar · 10 months ago

A good primary curriculum uses the 3 Rs rather than endlessly drilling them. Teach it, particularly reading, admittedly still in an exercise, but one that is focused on something other than reading,

You can't prioritise everything. Music, art, sport and so on have their place. But they can't be what you do after the basics are achieved.

4 ^ | v · Share ›



fatslaphead · 10 months ago

germanspy

"a very bright year 7 needs something to do even if it's just learning vocab, solving a few maths problems or writing a poem about his hamster."

I think you are absolutely right and that is why I said that homework is over rated for the kid.

1 ^ | v · Share ›



schoolswot · 10 months ago

"Of course we expect primaries to teach beyond just English, maths and science. That is why we are giving teachers more freedom than ever before,"

Really?

The section in the National Curriculum relating to English is 85 pages long!

And the Maths is 45 pages.

More freedom?

Rubbish. Freedom to do what we want more like.

By the way, how many schools will have sufficient teachers ready to teach the new ICT

5 ^ | v · Share ›



germanspy ↗ schoolswot · 10 months ago

SW

'By the way, how many schools will have sufficient teachers ready to teach the i

Just ICT?

THE problem with Gove's 'resurrection' of educational/academic standards is th
by teachers who themselves haven't a clue. It is a national disgrace how many i
'teaching' maths for example.

^ | v · Share ›



Difar → germanspy · 10 months ago

germanspy

As our state schools appear to have become marketplaces and Heads, in many cases, believe that they are running a business, it is little wonder that they are teaching subjects in our secondary schools that they are not qualified to teach what they are directed to teach by the management - should they have any gaps in their timetables then they are fair game. This happens in many of the years there has been a steady increase in the number of subject specialists and anyone with a qualification in one of those subject and who already teach are fair game.

Mr. Gove knows about this but this government seems to have abdicated teacher training/recruitment to the free market instead of taking responsibility for it. Thousands of schools are now directly responsible to the government. Mr. Gove doesn't believe that children need to be taught by qualified teachers. He believes that the training of teachers is of utmost importance.

2 ^ | v · Share >



germanspy → Difar · 10 months ago

Difar

You seem to be saying that everything is the current government's fault.

At the second school I taught in in the mid 80s I was the only male head of department (union rep if memory serves too....up because he was from a teaching college and had done geography given ALL the bottom sets and this was sanctioned by the evil dunderheads Catholics both! I suppose in today's staffrooms Gove is also responsible for one JC?

You are being extremely disingenuous when you talk about the quality of the untrained reader's eye to understand that Gove is advocating a system to teach. I'd like to see where that is written. He is, RIGHTLY, pointing out that the current system is beyond useless and a waste of everyone's time and money.

^ | v · Share ›



Difar → germanspy · 10 months ago

germanspy

Not at all - the situation in schools is a culmination of government decades, at least.

When you refer to teaching college - do you mean the old teacher training? This was entirely different to the PGCE. The head of department would have met his ilk. As for being given the bottom sets - sometimes you get the best teachers but you should have had a fair mix. Staffrooms are distant memories in to-day's schools and there are mixed feelings. It is a surprise you to learn that a large percentage of teachers are not :

I didn't mean to be disingenuous at all but the fact remains that the current situation relating to non-specialist teachers teaching in secondary schools is a blanche has been given to academies and free schools to recruit teachers without, even unqualified teachers.

I beg to differ about the PGCE system. From experience of me and my students and Graduate placement students I can tell you that the

[see more](#)

^ | v · Share ›



schoolswot → germanspy · 10 months ago

@germanspy

"He is, RIGHTLY, pointing out that the stupid PGCE system is a waste of everyone's time and money."

So why then did the new head teacher of Pimlico Primary who has never been let alone be in any management position, complete her PGCE to become head?

Given that she runs a free school she doesn't have to be qualified one?

1 ^ | v · Share ›



germanspy → schoolswot · 10 months ago

SW

Best ask her.

Most heads are deluded freaks of nature so..... there is a logic to suppose.

^ | v · Share ›



Guest → germanspy · 10 months ago

I've been meaning to ask you this for ages ... just who ought to be The lady in question has only the slimmest of claims to be a teacher in your eyes?

You obviously don't want teachers to be promoted to headships (the earth, yourself excepted) ... so who?

1 ^ | v · Share ›



germanspy → Guest · 10 months ago

Bamber

Once again your position is one of 'defensive paranoia'.

I have NEVER said expressly that ALL teachers are the scum of need to give an Oxbridge graduate lessons in syllogistic logic. The between some/many teachers aren't worth my spit and all teachers spit. etc.

Where have I said ever that I don't want teachers to be promoted the RIGHT teachers to be promoted to headships. I have nothing becoming heads.

All a head needs is people/sort skills, high intelligence and above
They don't need to know the Education Act 1944 verbatim or be a
research papers by some Trot Prof of Education at the University

^ | v · Share ›



schoolswot → germanspy · 10 months ago

So you want primary teachers to be mathematicians?

What about English?

"is that our schools are populated by teachers who themselves haven't a

Usual wide sweeping generalisation.

Do you know many teachers there are? So how many do you know?

2 ^ | v · Share ›



Guest → schoolswot · 10 months ago

GS says primary teachers don't need to be graduates at all. Sha

^ | v · Share ›



germanspy → Guest · 10 months ago

Bamber

Define graduate.

Then go back thirty years and redefine it.

See what I'm getting at?

(Hint: We actually have illiterate and innumerate 'graduates' a go
Believe me I know several! We need teachers - especially in prim
well spell and add up!)

^ | v · Share ›



Sun · 10 months ago

Last time I checked, the Victorian age was better than now in many ways.

I love how these idiots use it as a pejorative word.

3 ^ | v · Share ›



Gettingoldernow → Sun · 10 months ago

Britain was great back then. But then again it used to be . . . er . . British.

^ | v · Share ›



Sun → Gettingoldernow · 10 months ago

Er...you need to work on your...er...wit...er..

^ | v · Share ›



Gettingoldernow → Sun · 10 months ago

Surprising comment, I was agreeing with you. I do not see what I merely trying to be as PC as possible.

^ | v · Share ›



Sun → Gettingoldernow · 10 months ago

Really? I thought you were trying to mock me.

My apologies.

^ | v · Share ›



hillbilly · 10 months ago

As an ex-academic, I can put my hand on my heart and say that a lot of universities are who are totally bloody useless idiots.

6 ^ | v · Share ›



Sun → hillbilly · 10 months ago

That made me laugh. Although why is your name "hillbilly?" Not very academic..

^ | v · Share ›



weybridge · 10 months ago

Thatcher closed more grammar schools than any other Sec for Education.

1 ^ | v · Share ›



fatslaphead · 10 months ago

johnbald

"He was well thought of by Sarah Teather,"

That just has to be the kiss of death.

3 ^ | v · Share ›



johnbald → fatslaphead · 10 months ago

Indeed. The most ineffectual minister since Alan Johnson.

^ | v · Share ›

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