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# MORTARBOARD BLOG



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## Literacy lowdown: should we worry about primary standards?

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The latest findings from Cambridge University's huge review of the state of English primary schools decry pupils' literacy abilities.

According to the [Primary Review](#) researchers, kids are no better at reading now than they were in the 1950s. This is despite the £500m the government has spent on introducing its national literacy strategy.

Not only that, but the national curriculum tests - or Sats as they are more commonly known - have supposedly led to schools "teaching to the test" and increased stress and anxiety among the children who have to pass them.

Schools minister Andrew Adonis gave a repetitious defence of the government's record this morning. On the BBC's Today programme, he said (over and over again) that primary standards are at their highest ever levels. And it is only since the national curriculum tests were introduced that there is solid evidence of consistent improvement that has been validated "many times" by independent experts.

"Ofsted said that the literacy strategy has brought about a transformation in the teaching of reading," he countered, and proclaimed the government's more personal approach - providing extra one-to-one tuition and reading recovery programmes, free books for young children and 11-year-olds, special boys' bookshelves in school libraries, and next year's national year of reading.

With the evidence providing polar opposite views on the standards of English primary schools, it's difficult to judge who's right. But in an age of TV, PlayStations, Facebook and mobile phones, it seems something, at least, that children still do read at all, and certainly not at a worse level than post-war.

And the Cambridge researchers do concede that England does pretty well in [international](#) terms - outperforming plenty of other developed countries in reading, science and even maths.

But even so, if the tests that the government says show things have



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Posted by

[Anthea Lipsett](#)

Friday 2 November 2007

07.52 EDT

[theguardian.com](#)



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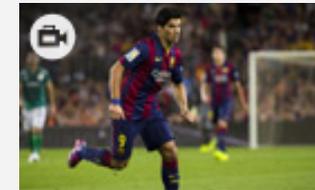
02 November 2007 6:10pm

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With the Australian brumby facing culling in the Snowy mountains, those working closely with the animals plead for their protection



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Andrew Collins gives his verdict on The Village, Sweets Made Simple, Boomers,

Scrappers and Richard E Grant's Hotel Secrets

36 comments



### Cheetah and dog become best of friends

Baby cheetah who was rejected by his mother is raised with puppy at

San Diego zoo



Errr .... weren't the 1950s supposed to be the Golden Age of rigorous educational standards, as identified in all right-thinking comment on schools?

So you'd have thought critics would welcome having the same levels of literacy now as then.

Actually, the research says "Generally, mathematics and reading standards have remained fairly constant for some time although both have risen recently. Reading has risen very slightly and mathematics has risen moderately."

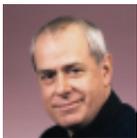
There's also a lot in the reports, available at <http://www.primaryreview.org.uk/Publications/Interimreports.html> , about data and how difficult it is to get consistent measures over time or between countries.



**littlepiggy**

02 November 2007 6:25pm

Although I have been known to moan about kids getting too much homework, I can't remember anyone nodding along in agreement. For every five year-old getting stressed over word lists, odds on there is a parent pushing behind them, and most likely one who didn't do too well in their own educational career.



**gavinbullock**

03 November 2007 7:27pm

The findings of this study are worrying enough but what is even more disturbing is the attitude of the government to the findings. If the report was about a pharmaceutical drug and showed it was ineffective or dangerous, the medical profession and government would have to take note. If such a hypothetical report was dismissed out of hand by the medical profession and the government, there would be uproar. The response would be seen as irresponsible, even criminally negligent.

Yet here we have Lord Adonis dismissing the educational study in the most perfunctory way. What careful research has his ministry done along the same lines? None. And why not? Adonis was a journalist - a serious one - but he has no background in education as far as I can see. Does he give an analytical critique of the research? No - he is hardly qualified to do so. Who would you believe, an unqualified layman or a group of academics with proper statistical support. Academics can be wrong but an ex-journalist minister with rather big vested interests is a little more suspect.

## On the Guardian today



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This, I am afraid, is the general approach of this government. Its ideas come from ideology or, rather, preconceived ideas, about things and how they should be dealt with. They treat our country like some vast social laboratory, imposing massive and expensive changes based on what someone read about targets in a business text book a friend lent them, or what Tony Blair's ideosyncratic ideas were about crime and punishment. When someone who knows what they are talking about does a bit of hard graft and actually goes out looking and measuring and finds the government's great experiment is a load of ill-conceived tosh, these out-of-touch ignoramuses (who were humble MPs before they formed a government) wave it all away with the arrogance for which they are justly famous.

These people would rather our children put up with a bad system of education than admit fallibility, blighting the children's chances in life. This country has suffered from bad governance for decades and that is why we come bottom of the league in almost anything you can think of.



**Jackasset**

06 November 2007 6:58am

There was an international exam results' comparison study done some years ago, with all pupils from all nations getting exactly the same tests. Woe, Woe and thrice Woe! when it was revealed that British kids scored lower than some "3rd World Countries" High time we pulled our socks up and pulled the plug on that box. To all parents who read to and encourage their kids to do likewise, you can only be applauded for introducing them to the magical world of imagination, where the printed page is unseen, but the adventure unfolds in the fertile mind.

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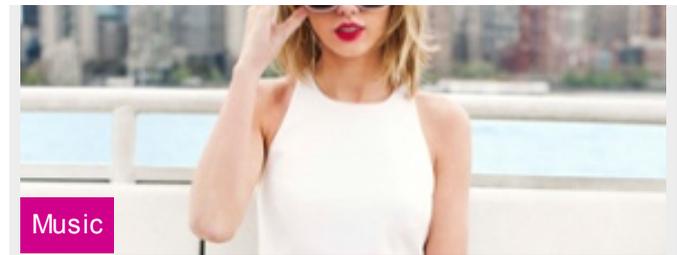
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