

I taught Rishi maths and he doesn't know how lucky he was

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Sunak's ex-tutor says the PM's veneration of mathematics is coloured by his privileged education. By *Victoria Lambert*

For numerous Britons, Prime Minister Rishi Sunak's announcement last week that all pupils will study maths until the age of 18 appeared to be something of a zero-sum deal. For all those children who would benefit – and cope with – additional tuition, many more would find extra maths a debilitating struggle.

Nick MacKinnon, former Winchester College mathematics teacher and housemaster, who counts the PM as a former pupil, is in no doubt that it's a bad idea.

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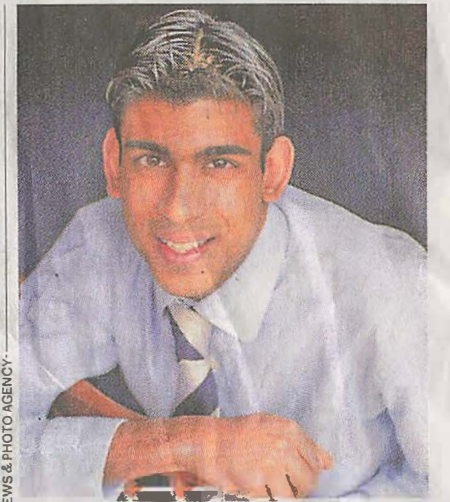
MacKinnon, who worked at the exclusive Hampshire school for 34 years from 1986 to 2020, and who otherwise approves of Sunak (though he doesn't remember him from school), explains: "The idea is bizarrely self-revealing."

The issue, he believes, is that Sunak, who he thinks was about a quarter of the way down the maths ability range at Winchester, had such an incredible

maths education that the PM simply doesn't understand both how good it was, or how unusual. "Rishi Sunak had a Concorde maths education, built in Britain. It was as good as anyone's in the history of the world."

He also doesn't comprehend how hard replicating it will be. "At the time Rishi's parents sent him to Winchester," he says, "we were in the last years of using the School Mathematics Project (SMP), which was inspired by the Cold War. He was in the very last cohort. Sunak got his maths straight from the SMP factory in Winchester."

Those lucky enough to have learnt maths via SMP (in Cambridge University Press textbooks) can be identified by the way we recognise, Pavlovian-style, the three words associated with it: sets, mappings and vectors. This trio of concepts lay at the heart of SMP maths, also known as New Maths, designed by teachers and organised by Sir Bryan Thwaites out of the University of Southampton. At the



Numbers guy: Rishi Sunak, above, attended Winchester College, left

MacKinnon. "He's found his understanding of maths very [empowering] and wants it for everyone else. He may even think any school could offer what he was given."

"I'm in favour of maths at school, of course, but the top 10 per cent should be doing far more interesting work. Most pupils should do far less. People create the maths they need in their work and play as adults, and you find a very high standard in the trades and at the snooker table, but they didn't learn it at school."

So does that mean SMP is out? "It won't be easy to recover that Soviet level of abstraction again, even though we kept it flying at Winchester until Rishi was 18," says MacKinnon.

"But if we want to make the most of Britain's talent we should identify the top 10,000 mathematicians each year – and give them all what Rishi took for granted," he says. "We know who they are from the UK Mathematics Trust Maths Challenges [a charity that coordinates maths competitions]. The aim should be to educate them really well: shouldn't society want that?"

'This is the first stupid thing he has said since becoming Prime Minister'

time, the Russians had launched their Sputnik programme and the race to explore space had begun. Thwaites was determined to bring the British up to speed, so we wouldn't fall behind the Soviets and the Americans.

That meant walking away from the traditional arithmetical approach and introducing children to abstract mathematics from the age of four.

A few independent schools such as Marlborough College began picking the method up. Often it depended on how close they were to Southampton.

The link to Sunak's alma mater was especially tight: Bryan Thwaites was a Wykehamist and the staff – particularly heads of maths John Durran and John Smith – were steeped in SMP from the start.

"Winchester really understood it," says MacKinnon, as did Marlborough College. "At A-level, lessons were stretching even for Wykehamists, who are good mathematicians. Rishi was fed that level of maths every day as a norm, like eating his breakfast cereal."

But not everyone liked New Maths, reports MacKinnon. In the US, the system was abandoned quickly for being too abstract and unfamiliar. In 1999, *Time* magazine listed the 100 worst things in the 20th century and included New Maths alongside prohibition, asbestos, and the Treaty of Versailles. In the UK, most state

schools rejected it after an initial enthusiasm, and when Tony Blair began moves to widen access to further education, the SMP became unsustainable as even selective schools chose simpler, modular courses.

So, shouldn't we be pleased that Rishi Sunak wants us to be better at maths – and will he bring back the elite approach? To the first question, MacKinnon says that even at Winchester – "a maths school" – some students shouldn't do maths beyond 16. "They are very clever but need to spend time working on the humanities like History, English and French, which anyway are much harder than maths, which is a lazy subject if you can do it. As easy as breathing."

Sunak cannot see that – then again, "he cannot see that he was given this incredible start in maths," says

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