

Friends, Romans, schoolchildren



A child at the Pegasus Primary School, Oxford, takes part in a Latin class

The only remotely classical thing about Pegasus Primary School on the Blackbird Leys estate in Oxford is the name and the school logo of a blue winged horse. The logo looks cuddlier than the Pegasus of Greek mythology, sprung from the blood of the gorgon Medusa when the hero Perseus cut off her head.

This is not the Oxford of the dreaming spires; the school is in one of the largest council estates in Europe, close to the former Morris car works at Cowley, where Minis are now made. My taxi driver points out the Blackbird pub, noted for fights, and a supermarket which he claims has been raided five times in the past year.

This well-run primary school in a tough area is doing something culturally counter-cyclical: it is teaching Latin and Greek under the auspices of the Iris Project, a volunteer-run scheme which brings classics to inner-city state schools. As someone who loved classics at public school in the 1970s, when the subject seemed out of date and doomed to oblivion, I find this both incredible and thoroughly heartening.

Pegasus's headteacher Jill Hudson is on a mission to redress the inequalities of opportunity in a city as "split" as Oxford. "The kids love Latin. They are interested in history – the Romans were here, in Blackbird Leys – and if you're interested in history you need to know Latin. There's nothing wrong with their brains; they are as clever as the kids from top prep schools like the Dragon [in Oxford]. They just sometimes don't have the confidence. I want to make our kids believe they can do anything."

Francis Murphy, deputy head and the school's language specialist, says: "What attracted us was the level of scholarship and the level of language learning. The children need to have access to the same joy in learning that any child has." He dismisses the idea that only very bright kids can learn Latin: "It's accessible to everyone, and we've got the full range here."

I sit in on a class of nine and 10-year-olds getting to grips with the Latin verbs “to be” and “to love”. “*Sum* happy!” beams a girl. Teaching the class with passion and energy is Shivani Singhal, a 20-year-old, third-year classics student at Christ Church. “The children have such enthusiasm and the trick is to channel it. I’ll end up getting more out of it than the kids – the skills I’m picking up are immense.”

This resurgence of classics teaching in state schools, where Latin and Greek have been brought close to extinction, is happening in the face of formidable obstacles. An increasingly utilitarian educational philosophy over the past two decades has marginalised language teaching at secondary level; the requirement to take a foreign language at GCSE was dropped in 2004, making Britain the only country in Europe where studying a foreign language in secondary school is not compulsory.

Over the past decade the Department for Education has been preparing an obligation for primary schools to teach a foreign language. But the current guidance is that the language has to be a modern one, so Latin and Greek do not count.

None of this has deterred Lorna Robinson, 31, a former classics teacher at Wellington College, Berkshire, who is the founder and director of the Iris Project. “I was state-educated until I was 11, then I went to Oundle School, which had a brilliant classics department. I always felt I could have missed out. I did classics at Oxford University, then a PhD at UCL, on magic realism and Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*, and then I taught for a while at Wellington College. I enjoyed it but I wanted to make more of a difference. I feel classics is so life-enriching and rewarding.”



Iris started life as a classics magazine for schools, then Robinson had the idea of expanding it, and teaching the subject in state primaries. “I realised that teaching Latin would fit in very well with the literacy strategies at primary schools.”

Robinson believes that Latin helps with vocabulary, knowledge of parts of speech, syntax, spelling and punctuation and enables speakers to communicate more complex meanings. It offers a grounding in the building-blocks of language – any language – which the methods of teaching English that have been in vogue since the 1970s do not provide.

When I taught English at Eton in the 1980s, I saw this for myself. Many pupils lacked basic

grammatical knowledge of their own language. Not all of them knew the difference between an adjective and an adverb.

That Latin boosts literacy is the hardly revolutionary but powerful idea at the heart of Iris's philosophy. It is also behind other initiatives to promote the teaching of classics, such as Barbara Bell's *Minimus* course, published by the Cambridge University Press. Aimed at children from seven upwards, *Minimus* teaches Latin through the story of a mouse living with a Roman family at Vindolanda fort on Hadrian's Wall. More than 115,000 *Minimus* books have been sold.

The campaign to get Latin back on the curriculum is well under way. In June this year, the right-leaning think tank Politeia published *Latin for Language Learners*, bringing together a disparate group of classics enthusiasts, including *Inspector Morse* author Colin Dexter, playwright Tom Stoppard and Oxford's Regius Professor of Greek, Christopher Pelling. The aim is to try to pressurise the new coalition government into ending the current discrimination against classics. And the charity Classics for All has just launched a campaign with the aim of bringing classics to 1,000 state schools over the next 10 years.

But even if the teaching of Latin can be resurrected to some degree in primary schools, surely the even bigger obstacle is that once education gets really serious, at secondary level, pupils are encouraged to study subjects that bring vocational benefits. Here, Latin and Greek are seen as anachronistic and irrelevant.

Well, not necessarily so. The Sarah Bonnell School in Stratford, east London, is a 1,200-pupil, all-girls Specialist Language College. This is a deprived area of a rich city, and another state school reviving the teaching of Latin. My contact here is French and Italian teacher Sinead Earley, whom I met in March at a "Latin in London" event hosted at City Hall by the mayor of London and keen classicist Boris Johnson. Earley told me she was trying to persuade the school authorities to allow her to teach Latin. Now it seems she has succeeded.

The approach to Sarah Bonnell from Stratford station is past an immense shopping mall and building sites for the 2012 Olympics. I am not sure what to expect. Certainly not the grand reception area, with corporate-style potted plants, nor the smartness of the establishment, which was one of the last beneficiaries of the previous government's Building Schools for the Future programme.

More important than new buildings is a charismatic head. Cauthar Tooley describes herself on the school website as headlearner/headteacher: she speaks French, Farsi and Arabic and taught herself Latin. Tooley is proud of her school's Specialist Language College status, which enables the teaching of languages in small classes, and allows every pupil to go abroad at least once on a school trip.

In a school where more than 70 languages are spoken at home, why not add Latin? And Latin, as Tooley points out, is "a language that is going to educate us about so many others".

I sit in on a class of 16 girls in their GCSE year studying for a WJEC qualification, which counts

for half a GCSE, in Latin language and Roman civilisation. They are thoroughly engaged, both with a comprehension exercise and a discussion on what slavery meant in the Roman world. When I ask what attracts them to the subject, one girl answers, "It's refreshingly different from everything else." Later I speak to Lithuanian-born Jurga Zilinskiene, mother of Silvia, one of the girls in the class, who feels "very positive about and supportive of the teaching of Latin; it's a very structured language, which is healthy for young minds, and can be incredibly important for the future study of subjects like law and medicine".

The Sarah Bonnell girls are enjoying their Latin and doing well at it, but it is hard to see how they will keep it up afterwards; this school does not have a sixth form and few others offer Latin and Greek.

As I have conducted this research I have been worried that the justification for reviving the essentially non-utilitarian study of classics, in order to impress the Gradgrinds who run our educational establishment, tends to be worked into utilitarian terms. I don't doubt that learning Latin and Greek improves literacy skills in English, but I would argue that studying classics can bring even more profound benefits.

The Roman and Greek worlds fascinate children because they are both like and unlike our world. They are real and fantastical. We still use Roman roads and can see remains such as Hadrian's Wall and the exquisite mosaics of Fishbourne Roman Palace. A magnificent Roman bronze helmet with face mask was discovered in September in a field in Cumbria. Roman law remains the basis for the systems of civil law in use in continental Europe, South America, and much of Asia and Africa.

We may not (usually) wear togas or watch gladiatorial contests, but in our dreams and fantasies we can all be Theseus or Ariadne, Aeneas or Dido.

I feel that something wonderful may be starting to happen in dark times – the reinvention of classics not as training for an elite of civil servants and imperial administrators, but as the more (or most) humane expansion of the mind and imagination for all who can read and write. This I suppose is the original meaning of *Literae Humaniores*, the beautiful old name for the study of classics at Oxford. Classics, as Boris Johnson said at the Latin in London event, "unlocks untold riches", and it may just be about to take off once again.

For John Keats, a London boy from a modest background, coming into contact with Homer made him feel "like some watcher of the skies/When a new planet swims into his ken". Later, gazing at a Grecian urn, he heard its ultimate message and consolation, in the midst of all the world's woe, as this: "'Beauty is truth, truth beauty," – that is all/ Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know.'

To say that the study of classics offers a route to truth and beauty may sound over-idealistic in a world mired in practicalities. But the Greeks and Romans were mired in practicalities as much as we are, and still found time to ask questions about what constitutes the good life and the good society, and to produce literature and art that have never been surpassed.

The Renaissance, the seminal intellectual and artistic event of the past 1,000 years in the west, sprang from a rediscovery of classical philosophy, history, poetry, art and architecture. Are we in line for another?

Harry Eyres: Naples: a city in need of mercy

The Iris Project: www.irismagazine.org

Classics for All: www.classicsforall.com