

Classics in Comprehensive Schools Conference: July 3rd 2010

A one-day conference for teachers of Classics in comprehensive schools took place at Cambridge on Saturday 3rd July 2010. St John's College provided accommodation and lunch for the 30 delegates who represented 22 schools from a wide geographical area from Northumberland to the Isle of Wight. This first meeting of its kind explored some of the issues which affect teachers in this sector perhaps more than any other. It was particularly successful in enabling them to share their different experiences and pool ideas for developing their subject in their own schools.

After an introduction by Bob Lister, Chris Cotton (Schools' Liaison Officer at St John's) gave a brief talk about University Outreach and secondary schools, while Julie Wilkinson (ex-Head of Classics and now Assistant Head at Nower Hill High School) gave an insider's account of how senior management makes decisions about curriculum, resource allocation and timetabling. Discussion focused first of all on the problems which small, often one-person, or newly-created departments faced, and then on how the larger, more established departments might help with advice.

There were several common themes in the discussions. Areas for concern included: the difficulty of persuading senior leadership teams to provide adequate timetable space for nascent departments; the lack of time available which was perceived to be necessary to bring pupils to the standard of GCSE Latin; the discontinuity of subject provision from year to year if numbers did not rise above a certain minimum; the reliance on non-Classicists to provide teaching (both as lead teacher and as assistants). The discussion was not all negative, however. What came across equally strongly was the sheer commitment and determination of teachers to provide Latin (and in some cases Classical Civilisation, Greek and Ancient History) with before and after-school clubs and lunchtime lessons, with all sorts of incentives for pupils to give up their time. One wonders how much of this would be expected of teachers in other subject areas, and how much the University Classics Departments will take into account the situation under which pupils have been taught when they apply to read Classics.

The teachers present were asked to complete a questionnaire which asked for information about the provision of Classical subjects in their schools. There were 17 respondents. The data presented below is drawn from this information.

All 17 schools offered Latin to GCSE. The teaching of this all took place at KS4, except for one where it was offered as an option at KS5. Four schools were able to offer Latin at A-Level, but this depended on numbers opting.

Six schools offered Classical Civilisation at GCSE, of which three continued to offer it at A-Level; they were joined by three other schools which offered Classical Civilisation only at A-Level.

Two schools offered Greek at GCSE, of which one continued through to A-Level.

Senior managers seem to wish to include the teaching of Latin in their schools because of the attractiveness to parents of the high academic status they perceive of the subject. They also wished to provide Latin as a subject which they believe stretches and challenges pupils, particularly those identified as Gifted and Talented.

Teacher O: *“[The] Head teacher [is] keen to support applications to Oxbridge. [There is] support for the more traditional curriculum”*

and

Teacher M: *“The school (Head teacher in particular) was keen to offer Latin as an academic school particularly targeting Gifted and Talented pupils.”*

In all of those schools where Latin teaching has only recently started, these two reasons seem to be the prime motivations for its introduction. In those schools where Latin has been embedded in the curriculum for a longer time, these arguments were less prevalent. Indeed, in Teacher F’s school, where Latin had been taught for many years to a small cohort of Gifted and Talented Modern Foreign language pupils, the subject had become an entitlement to all Year 8 pupils for the first time this year. Such stories do give encouragement to teachers in similar situations where Latin is only offered to very small numbers at present.

Respondents described a number of difficulties which affected the provision of Latin in particular, as well as other Classical subjects.

Eight respondents were concerned about the timetable arrangements that senior managers had made for the teaching of Latin in their schools. In four cases concerns were expressed about the fact that Latin was not timetabled. Instead Latin was offered as a before-school, lunchtime or after-school club. The effect on pupil motivation varied:

Teacher K: *“There are huge difficulties, and pupils have to be very motivated to continue studying. We don’t always manage every week for a variety of reasons. There is little commitment from the Senior Management Team. After school [lessons] are difficult because [the] pupils are from a wide geographical area – transport problems.”*

while

Teacher Q: *“Latin being off timetable – pupils often float in and out...I suspect that off-timetable is probably the best way to go as pupils are more committed.”*

These two teachers illustrate the issues under consideration: for one an off-timetable club does not provide the stability and continuity required for pupils to pursue an academic subject for examination; for the other, it is precisely the fact that pupils have to be well-motivated to attend that makes the arrangement work. For the first, off-timetable Latin is something to be avoided; for the latter, the flexibility it offers to teacher and students is its strength.

In the more established Classics departments, Latin and often Classical Civilisation too were timetabled. But here teachers seemed to like to provide extra classes for those pupils who wanted to study even more Classical subjects. Teacher P offered two extra-curricular Classical subjects. Extra-curricular Latin was offered to pupils who were not allocated to the Latin classes in Year 8, and Extra-curricular Greek was offered to pupils who were already studying Latin to GCSE in Years 10-11. Three teachers mentioned that they regularly taught AS Latin or GCSE Greek to

individual pupils off-timetable, in order to enhance their applications for University entrance.

The amount of time allocated to the teaching of Latin varied considerably. KS3 Of the 17 schools which start teaching Latin in KS3, six offered a 3 year course, five offered a two year course and four offered a one year course. Two schools did not offer anything at KS3 in preparation for a Latin GCSE. The amount of time set aside for Latin teaching varied considerably, from 30 to 120 minutes per week in KS3. Only one school –strongly supported by the Head - offered more than this, with 300 minutes per week in Year 9. On average (taking out this school's extraordinary figures) Latin was taught for just over an hour per week in each year of KS3 where it was offered. Thus the total number of hours of Latin provision was on average 44 hours per year. But not all schools offered Latin for the whole period. Instead, schools offered one, two or three year courses, and of those courses, some were not dedicated purely to Latin teaching, but may have been part of a general Classics taster course or part of a taster course with other optional subjects such as a second modern language. For some pupils, therefore, the total number of hours available for Latin teaching during the whole of KS3 was as low as 58 hours, whereas for others the total was 351 hours. Of all the 15 schools which offered at least one year of Latin prior to GCSE, 4 allocated less than 1 hour to teaching, 4 one hour, and 7 more than one hour.

Of all 18 schools, 14 had Year 10 GCSE Latin timetabled, 4 did not. 14 had two or more hours' of teaching per week. 4 had one hour or less. 1 school from this latter group was only allocated 40 minutes per week for GCSE Latin. In Year 11, the picture was more difficult to discern, as several of the schools had not been in a position to enter pupils for the GCSE as they have recently started teaching Latin. Of the 12 respondents who were offering Latin in Year 11, half had taught it for 1-2 hours per week, while the other half enjoyed more than two hours. The overall range was 75-180 minutes per week. Three schools offered GCSE Latin without previous study as a two year course in Years 10-11 or 12-13. On average, schools provided 165 hours of Latin teaching in total in preparation for the GCSE, not counting what had been provided during KS3. This compared with the 120 guided hours of teaching which OCR considers sufficient for the Latin GCSE. One must draw the conclusion that the schools which were able to offer Latin felt the need to provide more teaching hours than that which OCR suggests is necessary, and yet comments written by the respondents who had had little time to teach in KS3 suggested that they felt the OCR examination was too large to cover in the time available to them.

Seven respondents then found that there was an impasse in the development of the subject in their schools. They did not have enough pupils to warrant being allocated timetable time; but because they taught off-timetable, they did not attract enough pupils. In only two cases had the senior management made the commitment to time – not so much resources such as books – when they had encouraged the starting of new courses.

Seven respondents mentioned non-specialist staff in the context of staffing their Classics courses. The specialisms of these staff were English, History and Modern Foreign languages. No respondent suggested that the subject knowledge of these teachers was insufficient for the demands of the early parts of a generalist Classical Civilisation or even Latin class. Indeed Teacher B said, of the Classical Civilisation

course taught in Year 8 at her school, “it is entirely taught by non-specialists (mainly History) who love it.” One might take the view that pupils taught in the early stages by a range of non-specialist teachers might actually be beneficial. Firstly, by using non-specialists in the early stages of teaching Latin or Classical Civilisation Classics teachers might be able to focus in their teaching on examination classes at GCSE and beyond, and secondly, the sharing of teaching between Classicist and other teaching specialists might often enable the sharing of good practice and ideas across the traditional curriculum boundaries.

Four schools used a variety of methods to introduce pupils to the idea of studying Latin or Classical Civilisation. These models have all been tried and tested: there is nothing new here – but what is important to say is that all the respondents were convinced that these methods worked. Three schools ran “taster” sessions with pupils at the beginning of KS3. Pupils in teacher D’s school operated a carousel of half a term each of Latin, Classical Civilisation, German in Year 7, before options for starting in Year 8. In teacher J’s school pupils have taken a Latin “elective” for 12 hours spread over a term as a taster to choosing for the course beginning in Year 9. In teacher K’s school pupils have a 6-week taster course in Latin before options. These arrangements enable pupils (and staff) to make an informed choice about whether they should take a Latin or Classical Civilisation course. Another way to encourage the take-up of Latin is through offering a foreign trip as an incentive. Teacher Q reported that the annual trip to Rome for Year 9 pupils had been a major reason for them becoming sufficiently interested in the Roman world that they wanted to pursue their interests further with the Latin class. He also suggested that smaller departments might consider linking together if they had insufficient numbers to justify a trip on their own. It is important to remember that most pupils have no way of knowing that they are able to study Latin or Classical Civilisation at school level. By providing taster courses or school trips we reach a much wider audience – and even if those who “taste” or partake in the trip do not eventually follow through with a GCSE, the benefits of exposure to the mere existence of the subjects go beyond the individual experience.

It was good to hear how much Latin and Classical Civilisation is being taught in these schools – often under difficult circumstances. The warm words of the senior management team did not always seem matched by the actions of providing adequate time and resources. Nevertheless the dedication of individual teachers and the enthusiasm of their pupils were absolutely clear at the end of the conference and the delegates felt that the first conference meeting had been very useful in exchanging ideas and experiences. A follow-up meeting is to be arranged for 2011.

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