Changing Classics in Schools

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To Sue and Ian

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Foreword

In many respects classics is in better health than it has been for thirty years. In the world of the arts and media, ancient Greece and Rome continue to intrigue, entertain, influence and motivate. TV viewers are eagerly awaiting the second series of the HBO/BBC/RAI co-production *Rome*, which will chart the course of the civil conflict that followed the assassination of Julius Caesar. Two years ago film buffs had Wolfgang Petersen's *Troy* and Oliver Stone's *Alexander*, and are about to get *300*, the film of Frank Miller's graphic novel on Thermopylae, with perhaps a second Thermopylae film not too far off. Robert Harris has followed his success with *Pompeii* by embarking on a three-book series set in first-century BC Rome, of which the first, *Imperium*, was published to good reviews last year. Grayson Perry has revived the use of ceramic vessels as the fields for figurative scenes and several of his pieces also refer to the shapes of Greek pottery. The last eighteen months have averaged a new production of a Greek play every month in Britain, Ireland and the USA alone. It is especially interesting that in theatre there seems to be a trend towards the appropriation of Greek theatre by non-European, especially African, playwrights and directors, demonstrating that classical forms and content are 'good to think with' across cultural traditions.

In educational institutions too, classics is far from being at death's door. Every year around 600,000 children move from primary to secondary school in England with some formal study of ancient Greece and Rome under their belts, and have been doing so now for over ten years; that is just about every child currently in a maintained school in England and more: one and a half school generations. The number of entrants for Classical Civilisation and Ancient History at A level has remained steady for several years, and while Latin and Greek combined have an entry a third of that of Classical Civilisation and Ancient History, they too have held fairly steady over the last five years. The number of students taking classical subjects as either single or joint honours at university continues a gentle annual rise that has been occurring since 2000.

It has not been often that classicists have been able to experience relief if not actual pleasure at the prospect of new proposals for the National Curriculum, but that has been the case both with the publication in 2003 of *Excellence and Enjoyment: A Strategy for Primary Schools* and with the consultation proposals for the Secondary Curriculum Review published in February 2007. Both documents

advocate a more flexible approach to the curriculum, giving schools greater autonomy in selecting curricular content to match the needs of their children and in tailoring the curriculum to local priorities and opportunities. Admittedly, at primary level this could weaken the study of ancient Greece and Rome in that schools are free to give them less emphasis in the history curriculum. However, it is not likely that schools will rush on a large scale to abandon subject matter which they have planned and resourced themselves to teach and which has provided valuable learning for their children over several years. Teachers have learned that children enjoy engaging with Greek myths and that the Greeks offer excellent potential for topic work where art, citizenship, music, English and history, for example, branch from a single theme; many schools have Romano-British sites nearby, which they have built very effectively into their local studies courses. In addition, the flexibility of the strategy means that some schools may choose to make more of their existing classical components and that there are opportunities to provide experience of the classical world outside the more familiar subject structure.

It is at secondary level that there has been the most significant reduction in the amount of classics taught and that the pain at the decline of classics has been most acutely felt. At first glance, the Secondary Curriculum Review document offers little to cheer. The Roman Empire, which featured as compulsory in the original programme of study for History and was made optional in the Dearing Review of 1993, has now completely disappeared. There is now no direct reference to pupils studying anything prior to the early medieval period. However, anyone thinking for a moment that the current Secondary Curriculum Review would specify subject matter at that level of detail is out of touch with the direction taken by educational policy over the last five years. Naturally, the Secretary of State is going to bow to some cultural pressures in defiance of the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority (QCA) and require study of certain authors in English and of the British Empire in History, but this is not likely to be extensive and will not include classics. It is the overall tenor of the Review that is important, as its principal focus is to define the curriculum in terms of children's needs. In doing so, QCA emphasises the personal development of the child, the qualities and skills young people need to succeed in school and in adult life. There is a stress on personalising the curriculum and an endorsement of flexible curriculum and classroom provision in order to provide young people with experiences appropriate to their learning needs and interests. It is these that subjects are seen to serve, and when assessing the role of a subject in the curriculum, headteachers and curriculum planners will need to look for its capacity

to produce particular learning outcomes. The good news for classics teachers is that the outcomes are content free – they are broad skills and dispositions rather than propositional knowledge and specific skills. Therefore, if classics is to have a role to play in the secondary curriculum, it needs to be able to demonstrate two things: first, its impact – that it delivers certain learning outcomes for the young people who study it and how these outcomes relate to those of other subjects; second, the feasibility of including it in the curriculum – that there are resources to support it in terms of access to suitably qualified teachers, to learning materials and to time and opportunity.

Bob Lister's book is timely in that it is not fundamentally about the parlous state of classics in schools or about the history of its decline or about the cultural reasons why everyone should study Greece and Rome. Rather, Bob raises issues about the role of classics in the school curriculum by focusing on the experience of teaching and learning in classics in two curriculum research projects he has run, one in primary schools and one in secondary. Both projects were implemented by Bob when he was Director of the Cambridge School Classics Project and follow in the tradition of CSCP's emphasis on action research. His discussion of the projects triangulates among the aims, aspirations and experiences of the participants and stresses the need to see the links in learning between classics and other subjects. In basing his conclusions about learning in these projects on formal research he indicates the direction classics teachers are going to need to follow in order to meet the demands of the flexible curriculum for demonstrable impact on learners. He also addresses from a solid research base the expectations headteachers are likely to have for the feasibility of maintaining or introducing classics into the curriculum, exploring how it might be possible to provide sustained individualised experiences to meet the needs and interests of pupils in contexts where there is no existing provision of classics. Current changes to Postgraduate Certificate in Education (PGCE) courses are bringing them into a closer relationship to study at MA level. This should foster a favourable environment for PGCE trainees and their mentors in school to carry forward the research agenda and expand the evidence base for claims about learning in classics. If classics teachers follow the route Bob Lister indicates in this book, if they rise to the challenges and opportunities of the revised secondary curriculum with the determination and flexibility they have shown in the various crises of the last forty years, the future for classics in maintained schools could be brighter than it has been for some time.

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Abbreviations

AQA	The Assessment and Qualifications Alliance
Becta	British Educational Communications and Technology Agency
CLC	Cambridge Latin Course
COLP	The Cambridge Online Latin Project
CSCP	The Cambridge School Classics Project
DES	The Department of Education and Science (created 1964)
DfEE	The Department for Education and Employment (created 1995)
DfES	The Department for Education and Skills (created 2001)
GCSE	General Certificate of Secondary Education
GRIPS	Greeks and Romans in Primary Schools
HMI	Her Majesty's Inspector(ate)
ICT	information and communication technology
JACT	The Joint Association of Classical Teachers
LA	local authority (formerly LEA, local education authority)
LACT	London Association of Classical Teachers
NLS	The National Literacy Strategy
Ofsted	The Office for Standards in Education
PGCE	Postgraduate Certificate in Education
QCA	Qualifications and Curriculum Authority
SAT	Standard Assessment Task
VC	video conference