



# For the many and the few

A charity's quest to teach classics in deprived schools

PETER JONES

Back in 2014, I travelled to Pennywell, a socially deprived area of Sunderland, to visit Grindon Hall Christian School, a high-performing free school that taught classics. The teacher was first-rate, the pupils I observed enthusiastic.

At lunch the head and I sat down with some Year 6 pupils, and I asked them what they were studying. The *Iliad*, they said, in English. There followed a discussion of Poseidon's role in Book 13. The head nearly laughed his lunch over the table when they reprimanded me for failing to pronounce 'Poseidon' properly: they preferred the English pronunciation.

The reason for my trip was that the school was under attack from Ofsted. One result was a visit from the area's free school representative. The head told me how the woman had asked, her voice rancid with contempt: 'Why are you teaching Latin to pupils from Pennywell?' He replied: 'Because they are from Pennywell.' The rep had not the remotest idea what he was talking about. The head was removed, the school handed over to the Bright Tribe academy trust and classics ditched.

In the hapless rep's mind, classics was probably an elitist subject, one only for the elite. Is that really the reason for not teaching it? How can a subject be elitist? Only people can be elitist (from Latin *eligo*, 'select, choose, pick out') and choose who can do what subject, exactly like that rep, for whom the rich resources of our language, awareness of the roots of much of Western culture and raising pupils' aspirations are not on the menu for pupils from Pennywell.

The charity Classics for All (CfA) was founded in 2010 to give all pupils in state schools, regardless of ability or background, access to the study of classical subjects: Latin, Greek, classical civilisation and ancient history. Nearly 50 per cent of the schools it has reached are to be found in socially deprived areas exactly like Pennywell.

Some examples: in Kelmscott School in Waltham Forest, north-east London, 50 per cent of pupils are eligible for pupil premium funding and 47 per cent speak English as an additional language. Thanks to an inspiring English teacher, David Hogg, CfA started working with the school in 2012. Five of its teachers have now been trained to teach classics, with Latin on the timetable between Years 7-11, and Ancient Greek, which started in 2018, being taught to 34 students in Year 8 (GCSE as an option is to start in September).

At Blackpool Sixth Form College, Peter Wright was able to expand his classics operation with the help of CfA — it was then the only state school in the city to teach the subject. At the time, few of its pupils went on to higher education; last year, 17 students received offers to study classics at Russell Group universities, including Oxbridge. Owing to its success, Peter set up the Blackpool Network, introducing Latin and classical subjects into nine schools throughout the city, and in 2018-19 the network added six new schools. There are now more than 2,000 pupils taking Latin and classics in Blackpool, some to GCSE and A-level.

In the West Midlands, the Birmingham and West Midlands Classics Network was established in March

2018 after CfA's success in introducing classics into five schools in the region. Since then, the charity has helped 23 schools (eight primary and 15 secondary) to develop their classics provision, training 64 teachers and introducing 2,293 new students to classics, including around 800 pupils at Key Stage 3 and more than 200 at Key Stages 4 and 5.

In Leicester, classics was taught at only two independent schools and two sixth-form colleges in 2014. Working closely with Leicester University, CfA has since enabled 27 schools to teach something classical, with activities both on and off the curriculum, reaching around 8,000 pupils. On average, 30 per cent of pupil beneficiaries are eligible for free school meals and 60 per cent are from black or minority ethnic backgrounds.

How does CfA do it? With a simple model designed by programme director Hilary Hodgson. Any school that wants to start any classical subject — the languages, or the non-linguistic culture or history — must find a teacher already employed by the school to teach it. Then, working with Hilary's network of 15 classical support 'hubs' established across the UK and a range of partners, CfA will put in place, at no cost to the school, the training, resources and — this is vital — continuing support for the teachers as they exercise their new skills in the classroom. Since 2010, CfA has trained more than 2,000 teachers and reached more than 50,000 pupils in getting on for 900 state schools — all without a penny of state funding.

What's in it for the schools? You will now expect a long list of reasons why schools should start classics. You will not get it. Just ask the schools. Their reports on the academic consequences for, and the enthusiasm of, the pupils (and of the non-specialist staff newly trained in the subject) are a revelation and justify everything the charity is doing.

In particular, primary schools are finding that beginning their foreign language pathway with simple Latin provides (as every Latinist knows) a secure foundation for understanding how language works (without the worry of pronunciation or conversation). It also introduces pupils to 'higher register' Graeco-Latin-derived vocabulary, essential for success in secondary schools. The result? A sound linguistic basis for the modern foreign language to come.

As for Grindon Hall, Bright Tribe collapsed and the trust that runs the excellent Emmanuel College, Gateshead — which has itself just started teaching classics — has taken it over, renaming it Christ's College. So there is hope. As the co-founder of Classics for All, I know we would love the opportunity to reach out to the deprived pupils in Pennywell and in every other state school, primary or secondary, in Sunderland, the North East and elsewhere. We do mean it — Classics for All.

*Schools interested in teaching classics or those who wish to support CfA, go to [classicsforall.org.uk](http://classicsforall.org.uk), or contact our Executive Director Jules Mann on 07809 256839 or at [jules@classicsforall.org.uk](mailto:jules@classicsforall.org.uk).*

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