



An Interschool Partnership in Wakefield

by David Dean

Prompted by reading about projects elsewhere in the country – Birmingham, Liverpool, London for instance – I am writing to share my experience of working with a project to offer Latin to pupils in an 11 – 16 Catholic Academy in Wakefield, West Yorkshire. It is an unusual arrangement, but one which offers some ideas about what might be achieved elsewhere.

In the spring of 2004, I was approached by the Deputy Head of St. Thomas á Becket Catholic School in Wakefield to talk about what could be done to offer pupils in the school some experience of Latin. The school had never offered Latin before, but was attracted by the online materials being developed by the Cambridge School Classics project (CSCP). I knew the Deputy Head as our two sons had sung together in Wakefield Cathedral Choir. The school wanted to offer Latin as part of its bid to become a Humanities Specialist School¹. We talked about distance learning, what pupils could do working independently with guidance by email, and we joked about how one day there might be a trip to Rome! Initial funding came from a grant from the charity Friends of Classics, and we have subsequently received several grants from The Society for the Promotion of Roman Studies for books, and software licences for the project. This has enabled pupils to take books home with them, which has been very important in allowing and encouraging independent learning.

I was teaching at Birkdale School in Sheffield at the time, though living in Wakefield. Birkdale was generous in giving me time to discuss the project, and occasional afternoons when I could visit the school. We started with a mixed group of Year 9 and 10 pupils with a ‘Let’s see where we can get to’ aim. It was not very successful at first as the motivation to work independently and the ability to work without readily available specialist guidance hampered progress. Nonetheless one pupil from that first group did persevere to GCSE and achieved a very creditable A grade.

The project really took off when I moved to Queen Elizabeth’s Grammar School in Wakefield. Classics at QEGS had been through a thin time, and timetabled lessons were sparse: the school was happy to write a timetable which initially allowed me one afternoon a week to teach a class at Becket’s. The class was offered to pupils at Becket’s as an additional GCSE, taught on an hour a week, after school on Thursdays. (QEGS finishes at 4 while Becket’s finishes at 2.50 p.m.) The offer was made to pupils identified as Gifted and Talented², and around a dozen signed up. Of these, eight stuck with the course and made it to GCSE, four as a whole GCSE and four as a half. All got at least a C and one got an A*. As the class became established and it became known what could be achieved, it became more competitive to get into the class. For the last seven or eight years, there have been more than 30

bids to get into the class which starts with a nominal 15.

It quickly became necessary to split the Year 10 and 11 groups, and QEGS was very generous in making this possible. On Wednesday afternoons I go to Becket’s and teach from 3 until 4, and on Fridays my Year 11 class comes to QEGS on the bus, and I teach them from 3.20 until 4.30. Of the initial 15 or so, one or two drop out fairly early as they find the commitment difficult, or other demands are made on their time – drama and sport for instance. Thus we have a GCSE cohort each year of 12 or 13 pupils.

We work hard at giving the pupils a sense of responsibility for their own learning, and also on creating a group dynamic so that they support each other. This is particularly so in the Roman Civilisation and sources paper, where much of the learning takes place in a computer room with the support of the ICT teacher. We also run extra lessons in holidays, often with cake as part of the morning’s events! We encourage the pupils to think of this way of learning as looking towards post-16 courses, especially A levels, where they will need to learn more and be taught less, as it were.

We switched to WJEC Level 2 exams when they counted for league table points³, and that was a major boost to expectation and achievement. This also had the advantage of doing a module in January, which gave a huge lift in pupils’ expectation of themselves. One pupil sticks in my mind in this regard, an

under-confident girl. She got an A* grade in her January Latin module and her outlook both in Latin and in her other subjects was transformed. From being timidly hopeful she became ambitious and determined and has gone on to shine at A level.

An unexpected outcome has been that pupils have become more ambitious in what they think they can achieve, because they know that they have done something difficult. There are now regular successes in Oxbridge entries in a range of subjects, and I am sure that doing Latin outside the timetable has been a part of this uplift in expectation. Doing joint revision classes before exams with my QEGS boys has also given the Becket's pupils a lift as they know they are 'on the same page' by exam day. It has also spurred my QEGS boys on in case they are left behind ...

The project has been of great benefit to my teaching as I know I must make the best use of the very limited time available. I think it has been the best value INSET there could have been, and I have been spurred to find new solutions to make learning possible and effective. It has also benefited both schools – QEGS' reputation has certainly been enhanced by its commitment to supporting the Latin project at Becket's, and Becket's has benefited from the exam statistics but more so the rise in expectation and confidence of some of its brightest pupils.

There have been three Head Teachers of the school since the project began. All have been supportive of Latin, particularly the current Head, Cathy Baxendale, who has increased the provision of Latin in the school. She has delivered one lesson a fortnight of Latin to all pupils in Year 9, in order to work on English skills, particularly enhancing vocabulary. The curriculum time came out of English, and has been much welcomed by that department. The Head Teacher has given presentations to local Heads and Senior Leaders about the impact Latin has had in her school, with significant interest from other schools. An additional link has been made with Silcoates, another independent school in Wakefield, and pupils share a 'Latin day' of activities and learning, in late spring of Year 9.

At the outset, I had no idea what could be done, whether it would work, whether it would last, and whether it would be worthwhile. When we laughed at the outset about taking pupils to Rome we had no idea that we would by now have taken four groups, at two-yearly intervals, most recently in Easter of 2018. I had no idea that the first pupil who took GCSE would be my only pupil ever for whom taking Latin was a career move. After training at the English College in Rome (The Oxbridge of seminaries for English speakers) he was ordained priest a couple of summers ago. The numbers of pupils who have

passed through the class, and who have achieved marvellous grades, raising their expectations of themselves in the process, has been very gratifying. The support from QEGS for the project has been tremendous, as without that nothing would have been possible. Most of all, however, it has been so much fun. The cleaner who comes to my classroom on a Friday afternoon as my Becket's pupils leave told me it is amazing to see kids talking excitedly about what they have just done. That alone is reward enough: the fantastic exam grades are the icing on the cake!

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¹For details of the Specialist Schools Programme, see https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Specialist_schools_programme. The scheme ended in 2010.

²For details of the Young, Gifted and Talented Programme, see https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Young_Gifted_and_Talented_Programme. The scheme ended in 2010.

³For an explanation of the divergence between national examinations in England, Wales and Northern Ireland, and the future role of the WJEC examinations board, see, for example, the BBC website: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/education-39490307>