

# Knowing Ourselves

## How the Classics Strengthen Schools and Society



BY PETER DODINGTON

**Y**ears ago, when I was an assistant principal at a large urban high school in New York, I spent a good deal of time talking with students who had been sent to me for discipline problems. My usual strategy was to ask them to tell me about their personal goals. What did they want in their own lives? I tried to establish some kind of a foundation about what they intended to do, and then see if we could work back to how doing their schoolwork and not cursing at their teachers might help them get closer to that goal.

I am reminded of these sessions when I consider how we should respond to the many complaints today about public schools. Nearly everyone finds fault with them. Elected officials, such as state legislators and mayors, exhort us to crack down

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on incompetence and boost productivity by paying teachers according to how well they raise the test scores of their students. Writing in the *American Spectator*, Andrew Coulson complains that, “while every other service or product has gotten better, more affordable, or both, public school productivity has collapsed. It is now costing us more to teach kids less.”<sup>1</sup>

If I could sit down with these critics, I would try to go back to their personal feelings about public education. What do they want from the schools? What do they want for their own children? Then, we might find goals for the schools that parents, teachers, and the general public all share. Once we agreed on those common goals, we could begin to discuss how the schools might achieve them.

Deciding what we truly want for our children—what we hope they will want for themselves—is no easy task. It can’t just be a matter of happiness and success. Many end up with neither, yet live what all would agree is a good life. There has to be some consideration of what the children themselves want, what they believe are important goals.

I would go back to the ancient Greek maxim: “Know thyself.” This, for me, is the key to the kind of success I would want for our children. After all, knowing oneself is the first step in achieving success in areas one truly cares about. If we want our children to achieve not just success, but a success they truly want, we must help them first understand themselves. Then, they will know what they value and can focus on success in that area, whether it involves wealth, fame, or other less measurable but no less important achievements. One of the central goals of the school system, then, ought to be instruction in self-knowledge.

Studying the ancient Greek and Roman world provides students an excellent opportunity to work on this goal of self-knowledge. The ancients dedicated themselves to figuring out what “the good life” is, and they did so in a way that is clear and comprehensible to students. Studying them in our schools helps students think deeply about who they want to become and how they can achieve that.

In my work teaching high school Latin and classical studies, I have found two subjects particularly helpful in prompting

students to learn more about themselves: Homer and Latin. Homer's works give great insights into the process of self-realization. His epics are full of young people telling us about their highest goals in life. Perhaps this is why reading the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* was also one of the major components of the school curriculum for the ancient world. Likewise, learning Latin, even beginning Latin, helps students realize they can change themselves for the better. The combination of a difficult topic and a well-ordered, step-by-step curriculum allows even otherwise weak students to succeed, and gives them a new understanding of their own strengths and talents.

Studying Homer and Latin is also particularly well suited to our public school curriculum. These subjects set the highest academic standards but still are appropriate for a wide range of students: the weaker and the stronger, the richer and the poorer. This makes them an excellent way to fulfill the need for both equity and excellence in our public school system. Such studies are often seen as primarily private school subjects, but their real strength is their ability to improve the public schools.

I have spent most of my life teaching these courses. I began teaching English on an Indian reservation in Montana, but soon wanted to learn more about the classics. I think that working with Native Americans, who understood their traditions so well, sparked my interest in learning about my own roots. I set out to learn Latin and Greek and teach them at the secondary level. In the course of my career, I worked at some of the "best" and "worst" schools in the country, from private and selective public schools that sent almost all their graduates to the Ivy League, to public schools in low-income urban settings that ranked near the bottom academically in their cities and states. I started out teaching middle school Latin, then taught eleventh-grade Advanced Placement Latin for 10 years, and ended my career back in the sixth grade in the South Bronx. In all my classes, I always taught a good deal of Homer, and I even made time to teach courses on the *Odyssey* when I was an assistant principal.

If we could incorporate more work on Homer and Latin into the public school

curriculum, we would be taking a major step toward increasing educational excellence and equity, and solving the problems critics of public schools raise. These courses are well suited to our public schools and provide the kind of education in self-knowledge that I—and I hope others—want for our children.

### **Ideals for the Young in Homer**

There are many places in Homer where the young warriors share what is important in their lives. In the sixth book of the *Iliad*, for

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example, the Trojan prince Glaucus meets the Greek Diomedes on the battlefield. Diomedes has just dispatched several Trojan warriors and is amazed that one more has come out to face him. "Who are you?" he calls out to Glaucus, who replies at some length and ends with the following:<sup>2</sup>

Hippolochus bore me, I am proud to say,  
And sent me to Troy, and told me many times  
To be the best, always, and to keep myself above the others,  
And not bring disgrace on the race of my fathers.

Glaucus strives to be the best, not for himself alone but for his father and his ancestors. It is not his achievement that defines who he is, but the education he has received from his forefathers.

In aiming for this kind of excellence, Glaucus opens the door to a level of skill that is not tinged with conceit. He is not saying that he himself thinks he should be the best, but that this is what his father and ancestors want of him. What he thinks about his own abilities he does not say. Keeping his ancestors in the forefront of his mind allows him to strive to be the best while retaining his humility.

In our modern world, we often shy away from this idea of "being the best." It seems

so self-centered. No one wants to admit he or she is trying to be number one. We say, rather, that we should merely "do our best." Glaucus, though, shows us a better way. There is nothing wrong with saying that one has been taught to be the best. Then, no one is being self-centered; child and parent are actually working together to achieve the highest goals for each other.

The passage also conveys the love Glaucus feels for his father and the love he has received in return. His father wants only the best for him, but the implication is that he does not demand this of Glaucus. The passage makes no mention of force or compulsion, only advice. Glaucus is free to choose another path, yet he is also aware of the consequence—to "bring disgrace" on his family. His respect and love for his father lead him to do what is best.

Isn't what Hippolochus wants for his son what we all want for our children: that they attain the heights of whatever careers they choose, yet not let their success distort their views of themselves, and that they listen to our wishes and advice, and use both to further their own goals? We don't want them to say, "I am the best," but rather, like Glaucus, "My father taught me to strive to be the best."

Another expression of a young person's ideals is voiced by Hector, the best of the Trojan fighters. Later in the sixth book of the *Iliad*, he and his wife, Andromache, argue about why he must always fight in the front of the battle, where it is most dangerous. He mentions the shame he would feel if he ever pulled back and notes that he has simply grown accustomed to this kind of effort. He says:<sup>3</sup>

Nor does my spirit urge me (to pull back), since I have learned  
Well to be the best, and to fight in the front of the Trojans  
Winning great fame for my father and myself.

Hector has trained himself so well that he no longer has any interest in fighting anywhere but in the front lines. His heart and spirit bid him to do this; one could even say he likes it.

My students often say this is selfish. Hector admits he is simply doing what feels

good, even though it causes Andromache so much pain. But who would say putting your life on the line for the safety of others is selfish? It only seems so because Hector is brutally honest about it. He tells his wife exactly why he does what he does, regardless of how it might sound. To this honesty she has no answer, and she soon stops arguing with him.

It is a worthy goal to work hard, and to work hard on a task that benefits the community is even better. But to do this so well and for so long that it becomes second nature, that is something special. Hector has moved beyond simply believing in what he does; he has become a part of it. His self-sacrificing work has become his pleasure.

For another place where a Homeric hero shares what is best, I turn to a scene in book 12 of the *Iliad*. There, two Trojan princes, Sarpedon and Glaucus, discuss why they have become leaders of the Trojans. Sarpedon, the elder of the two, explains his feelings to his young friend. He says:<sup>4</sup>

My friend, if you and I, escaping from this war,  
 Could live forever, ageless and immortal,  
 Neither would I myself fight in the front lines,  
 Nor would I send you out into the fame-winning battle.  
 But as it is, the fates of death stand all around us,  
 Thousands, which we cannot flee nor duck under;  
 So come, let us go, and win glory from someone, or let them win it from us.

Sarpedon is not saying that risking one's life in battle is good in itself; he would avoid death if he could. But since immortality is not an option, the next best thing is to summon the courage to fight his best, so that either he, or the one who defeats him, achieves greatness.

What a good way to view conflict. No one wants it, but if it cannot be avoided, then fight your best, pushing the level of the contest to a higher plane, so that either victory or defeat will bring someone a higher level of success. Sarpedon shows

how even engaging in conflict can work for the common good. By fighting well, he helps both himself and his enemy.

If there is a theme to these passages, it is that the characters know themselves. Glaucus, Hector, and Sarpedon all understand why they have chosen the lives they are living. Knowing themselves allows them to explain themselves clearly to those close to them. They have looked into themselves and thought about why they act the



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way they do. Whether it is the connection to their parents, or the unavoidable fates, or just their own pleasure, they understand the forces that shape them. Their self-knowledge allows each to see what would be the best life and freely choose it. This theme of self-knowledge figures prominently in two other great scenes in Homer: Odysseus's confrontation with Circe in the *Odyssey*, and the final meeting of Achilles and Priam at the end of the *Iliad*.

On his travels home from the war, Odysseus meets the witch Circe, who changes his men into pigs but fails to change him. The traditional analysis of the poem often says she fails because Odysseus has been given a special flower by the god Hermes, which protects him. This is not how Circe herself sees it, though. In the scene where she meets Odysseus, she does not mention the flower (neither does Odysseus), but attributes his power to his own abilities. She understands, so to speak, why the gods gave him that special flower.

Odysseus makes those abilities clear in the previous scene. One of his men, having escaped from Circe, runs back and tells him they must flee; the witch is too powerful, he says, and they will certainly be killed if they return to her. Odysseus replies that this man may stay behind if he wishes, but he himself must go back and try to save his men. There is no other way, he says.

Then, when he meets Circe, and her potions and charms fail, she ascribes this immunity to the fact that Odysseus must be a special man whose mind cannot be manipulated. She says:<sup>5</sup>

What kind of a man are you? Where is your city and your people?  
 How can it be that in drinking that potion you were not charmed?...  
 There must be some kind of unchangeable spirit in your breast.

According to Homer, Odysseus's power lies in remaining who he is: someone who does not abandon his friends. Because he refuses to change when he decides to help his men no matter what, Circe cannot change him. He is a man

who lives by his own ideals; he knows who he is. Staying true to his nature is precisely what protects him and his men.

His men, in contrast, are eager to change. They hope to "lose themselves," as we say, in their pleasures with Circe. In their minds, they are already turning to their animal appetites as they sit down to her feast. She only helps them along. Odysseus, though, is not there for pleasure. He has come simply to do what he always does: rescue his men. He has chosen to remain who he is and so is free of the temptations of that place.

One of Homer's best lessons for our modern world is that courage is not just something for the battlefield or the witch's cave. Often, it appears in our daily lives. It may be as simple as making a difficult phone call or finding a way to confront a powerful boss. For our students, courage may be raising a hand to contribute to a class discussion or refusing to give in to a playground bully's demands. What mat-



ters, as Homer shows, is not how strong you are, or ready to take risks, but how you have decided to live your life. Once you decide, for example, that you are a person who always helps your friends, courage naturally follows.

One of the best scenes of introspection and self-understanding in Homer comes at the end of the *Iliad*, when the aged Trojan king Priam comes to the Greek warrior Achilles to ask for the body of his son Hector, whom Achilles has killed. Throughout the story, Achilles has been the typical type A warrior: he knows he is the best and revels in it. He argues with his general, Agamemnon, and then sulks in his tent, refusing to fight for an unjust leader; but then he returns to the battle with a vengeance when Hector kills his best friend. After Achilles kills Hector, he childishly refuses to allow the body to be buried or returned to the Trojans, taking out his anger by dragging the body around camp behind his chariot. Like many exceptionally talented people, Achilles is selfish, hot-headed, and alone.

The old king, Priam, then takes it into his head that he will go at night to Achilles, in his tent in the middle of the Greek camp, and beg him to return his son's body. As he tells his wife, Hecuba, he wants only to hold his dead son in his arms one more time. The gods pity the old man and help him get across enemy lines and into Achilles's tent. There, he falls on his knees and begs Achilles to remember his own father, who must also miss his son far away. Achilles thinks of his father, whom he has not helped for all these years. The two men sit and weep—one for his son, the other for his father and his dead friend.

Achilles then reminds Priam of two jars in Zeus's hall—one holding blessings, the other miseries—and how Zeus takes some from each when he parcels out the fate of men. His father, Peleus, was surely blessed in many ways, Achilles says, with wealth, honor, and even a goddess for a wife. But Zeus gave him sorrows, too, for there was no powerful race of children born to him, but only one son, who soon left for the

war. Achilles continues:<sup>6</sup>

And so I give him no care in his old age,  
Since I sit here far from my fatherland  
In Troy, causing pain to you, and to your children.

For all his selfish posturing and conceit, Achilles has a heart. And Priam has hit on the key to opening it: the one man in the



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world with whom Achilles has a loving relationship, his father. When Achilles is reminded of this relationship, he is led to consider his other relationships and finally comes to see the negative role he plays in all of them. Yes, he is the best fighter, but his prowess on the battlefield also means he causes the most pain. In his life, he has exchanged the love he could be sharing with his father for the pain he now inflicts on Priam's children.

When Achilles looks inside himself and reflects on what he sees, he opens himself up to a caring relationship with Priam and, one suspects, many others. He sees that the pain Priam's family has caused him, through the killing of his friend by Hector, resembles the pain he himself has caused. Achilles finally joins the ranks of the other Homeric heroes who, like Sarpedon, realize that all warriors, friend and foe, are fighting for the same kind of excellence, or who, like Hector, are attuned to the feelings of family and community. At

last, Achilles has matured into a caring and even loving adult.

In all these examples, self-knowledge leads to the kind of behavior we want for our children. Glaucus understands that much of who he is comes from his father, and thus he can set his sights on being the best without losing his humility; Hector understands fully how his training has formed his desires so they conform with his ideals of self-sacrifice; and Sarpedon knows that fate comes for us all eventually and so is free to choose a noble life and help others do the same. And, of course, Odysseus has the courage to defeat Circe because he knows who he is, and Achilles learns how to care about others by looking within himself. Their self-knowledge is the key to their success and satisfaction.

Similarly, our children's self-knowledge will enable their success and satisfaction. For them to succeed at the things they truly care about, they must look within themselves and decide what they want. It is this introspection and self-definition I would want them to master first, with the hope that outcomes such as courage, caring, and public success would follow. Self-knowledge, then, ought to be an essential element of what both educators and critics want for our children.

Reading about these ancient heroes, though, is only the first step. Learning an ancient language, like Latin, can take our children to the next level. When my students made progress in learning Latin, they began to see themselves as people who could face challenges and succeed. Studying Homer and Latin together, they truly learned to strive to be, as Glaucus says, "the best."

### Challenging Oneself with Latin

I have often felt the real change in students' sense of themselves and their own worth comes when they try to learn Latin. It is a way of re-creating oneself to accomplish a difficult and meaningful task. It is one thing to read about how Hector learns to be a courageous fighter so well that it becomes second nature to him; it is another to actu-

ally be Hector, mastering a noble task so well that it changes you and your view of yourself. This transformation is one of the central goals in teaching Latin.

Of course, this transformation only works if the task is difficult enough to make you reach for it. If it is already in your grasp, or you are just naturally good at it, succeeding will not tell you much about yourself. It's the effort that brings about the self-knowledge, or more exactly, the increase in effort. It's the realization that you have it within you to change yourself enough to complete the task, that you can mold your habits to fit your desires.

There are other difficult subjects that lead to self-knowledge when mastered; it's just that Latin is one of the best. Its combination of difficulty and seeming uselessness\* makes it a preeminent example of study that leads to self-discovery.

In my career as a Latin teacher, I have seen many students find themselves in Latin class, but two particular instances stand out. The first was my experience as the Latin department chairman at Martin Luther King Middle School in Kansas City, Missouri, in the early nineties. Kansas City had won a large settlement with the state, and so had upgraded and restructured all its schools. One of the improvements included introducing Latin at several neighborhood middle schools.

At King, we had eight Latin teachers and required all 800 students to take Latin. We used the same standard *Cambridge Latin Course* textbooks used in many private schools, and we entered all the state and national Latin competitions. King had been the worst middle school in the city when we started teaching Latin; I remember students coming to school literally barefoot. After three years, our scores on the state tests in reading and mathemat-

ics ranked the best in the city. Our students even beat one of the local private schools in a Latin contest.

None of this came easily. Many times, we were not at all sure we would succeed. I can remember numerous talks with frustrated teachers threatening to quit after a long day of difficult Latin classes. Many students were barely literate in English, let alone a foreign language. Still, we kept at it, convinced we could teach Latin to anyone. In time, we made progress.

I don't think simply teaching Latin transformed that school (we also had one of the best principals in the city), but I do



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think teaching Latin helped raise those math and English scores. The fact that we taught it at all brought about a change in the students' views of themselves. That we were offering a course like Latin to students who were in the lowest-performing school in the city said something to them about what we thought they could do. They knew it was a difficult subject and they struggled with it, but they knew we thought they could learn it. In a way, our frustration when they didn't learn enough helped them believe in themselves.

Then, as they slowly made progress, they began to change their own views of themselves and, I think, took all their courses more seriously. As they succeeded in Latin, even at an elementary

level, they began to believe they might do well on any academic task, even the opaque questions on the state exam. As Thomas Jefferson noted long ago, good schools teach students "how to work out their own greatest happiness, by showing them that it does not depend on the condition of life in which chance has placed them."<sup>7</sup> This is what was happening at King. Like Glaucus's father, we expected them to "be the best," and they were beginning to see that they could rise to the challenge, that they didn't have to submit to the chance conditions of life.

My second experience helping students find themselves with Latin occurred in another low-income school. In 2004, I joined the staff of Bronx Latin just as it opened. It was one of the new small public schools carved out of bigger ones in the New York City school system, though it was not a charter school. Here, too, we required Latin of all middle school students. The school had no entrance requirements; it enrolled the neighborhood kids from the Morrisania section of the South Bronx.

The school did well from the start. It consistently received As on city report cards, and students did well on state tests. Seventy percent of my ninth-graders passed the New York State Regents exam in Latin, even though this is considered an eleventh-grade test. Even some of my eighth-graders passed it. Bronx Latin still faced the usual urban middle school problems, including fights on and off school property and the shooting of one of my students, but the students had no problem learning Latin.

When I think of how our Latin classes helped those students, I am reminded of a conversation I had with some students as we were returning on the subway from a Latin contest. We had done well, but won no awards. Our best showing had been against another school in the Bronx, a specialized high school that had a competitive admissions test. "You know," said one of the students, "we knew just about as much as the kids from that school, yet none of us got in there. We all took the test."

\*Latin helps our students learn many valuable skills, from vocabulary and grammar of English (as well as of French, Italian, and Spanish), to the history and culture of the Western world. How better to understand the ideas of such figures as Newton, Jefferson, and Milton than to study the language they studied? These benefits are well established among academics but often are not well known to students—thus the seeming uselessness of the language.

I asked her what she thought was the reason. “They cheated on the test?” was her first thought, but I assured her this was unlikely. We continued this discussion the next day in class and eventually came up with the following: the Latin contest proved they were the academic equals of the students accepted by that other school, so there must have been something wrong with the way the admissions test was judging them; either they were not preparing for such tests correctly, or the test itself was inaccurate, or both.

This was another way Latin helped my students learn about themselves. They had assumed that anyone accepted by a high-level school was “smarter” than they were, and they had never questioned that the problem might be in the testing process itself. Latin, though, gives students, especially those from poorer neighborhoods, a good way to gauge their abilities. It levels the playing field, so to speak, since it is a new subject for every student. That minimizes the impact of their previous educational backgrounds and makes it a good way to judge who can do well. In a way, it is like chess or fencing, which also work well in low-income areas. Neither activity depends on the kind of past educational problems that often hinder low-income students in other subjects. By learning Latin, my students were also learning about their own true abilities.

Latin, then, is also an excellent means of improving students’ knowledge of their self-worth. It draws them in, step by step, until they realize their success does not depend on others; they can change themselves. Latin enables them to achieve a new level of academic success if they are willing to do the work involved. Like the study of Homer, it gives them self-knowledge.

Just as Latin works well in low-income schools, it also works well with weak students. One often hears that only elite students (rich or poor) can learn Latin, but there is nothing about Latin that makes this inherently true. In even my most advanced Latin classes, I always had a few very weak students, and Latin worked quite well with

them. The subject is sometimes even taught as a special education class. Students who fail out of other foreign languages often end up in Latin. It is so clearly organized and proceeds in such incremental steps that virtually all students can master it. Being quick-witted, of course, does help, but one can come up with the right answer just by laboriously following all the rules. The pedagogy of Latin, having been perfected over literally millennia, has been worked out so carefully that it can be mastered by students of any ability, given enough diligence and patience by the student and the teacher.



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We might say, in fact, that the study of Latin is a particularly “American” solution to our public school problems. This is because Latin accomplishes our American insistence on both equity and excellence. It both challenges our students to attain the highest levels of intellectual skill and also provides a way for all of them to succeed.

This goal of offering the best to every student is never easy to achieve. It places an incredible burden on the public schools to devise an educational program fit for our best leaders and yet still open to all. When it becomes too difficult to offer such an education, there is a natural tendency to lower standards so more students can more easily attain them. Soon, excellence is only expected of those for whom it comes

easily, and equality is abandoned.

To fight against this tendency, Latin is one of our best weapons. It sets the standard of achievement at the highest levels, yet provides opportunities for even the lowest-level students with its simplicity and clear structure. Latin is difficult, but all it actually requires is diligence. Isn’t that true of so much in life? If we truly believe in the goals of public education, and want not only to better our children but our society as a whole, we must push for courses like Latin. It is the path to equal opportunity and excellence.

In public education, we take the goal of having our children succeed and extend it to the entire society. Public education aims not just to teach our children, but to improve our world. What we pay for in public education is the public benefit we all receive when these better graduates become adults. That’s why we all share in the cost of it, not just the parents of the children in school. The ultimate goal of the public schools is a society that is better, and more self-aware, than the previous one.

In the end, we all, educators and critics alike, want the same things for our children: that they succeed at the things they care most about, and mature into responsible and successful adults. To do this well, they need to understand themselves. As Hector, Odysseus, and Achilles show us, this introspection can lead to the kind of courage, satisfaction, compassion, and achievement we want for them. The study of Latin and the classics gives students a perspective on their own strengths and abilities. It can be the starting point of a good life for all our children. □

#### Endnotes

1. Andrew J. Coulson, “A Less Perfect Union,” *American Spectator*, June 2011, 19.
2. Homer, *Iliad*, ed. D. B. Monro (London: Oxford University Press, 1884), 6.206–209.
3. *Iliad*, 6.444–446.
4. *Iliad*, 12.322–328.
5. Homer, *Odyssey*, 2nd ed., ed. W. B. Stanford (London: Macmillan, 1959; reprinted in 1974), 10.325–326, 329.
6. *Iliad*, 24.540–542.
7. *The Life and Selected Writings of Thomas Jefferson*, ed. Adrienne Koch and William Peden (New York: Modern Library, 2004), 244.