



"WE HAVE A MORAL PURPOSE"

At La Fontaine Academy expectations are high, but academic results aren't everything. This is a school with a vision for transforming the world into a better place, explains **Jacob Stow...**

It looks like a regular PE lesson – children crawl along mats, roll about and move their arms in energetic fashion – but this is something a bit different. Listen closely and you'll hear that the teacher is speaking entirely in French. There are plenty of "un, deux, trois", a few "maintenants" and some

approving "très biens", and the children join in enthusiastically, even if the meaning of much of what's said ricochets from their earlobes. We're not in an École Primaire, we're in Bromley, so what's going on?

La Fontaine Academy isn't a bilingual institution, its headteacher, Dr Sebastien Chapleau, stresses, but it

does have a strong focus on languages. "It's not because I'm French," he says. "It's because we believe our children are going to live, study or travel abroad. It's our duty to make sure they can cope with different cultures and societies. The world we live in doesn't do that very well at the moment – we've messed it up as a group

of adults – so we have to make up for that by telling children that learning a language is great. It gets you to think about the world differently and opens your mind to different cultures, religions and perspectives."

MFL lies at the heart of La Fontaine, then, but it's only one aspect of Sebastien and his team's vision for a school still in

its formative years. Part of STEP Academy Trust, La Fontaine opened in September 2014; the oldest children occupying its classrooms are in Year 4, and staff are still awaiting their first visit from Ofsted, but already an identity and sense of purpose has emerged. Developing children's character and grasp of global citizenship, encouraging teachers to lead while managing their stress levels, and forging close links with families are all on the agenda, and there are big plans for the future.

1 Integrated learning

The aforementioned PE lesson isn't a once-a-term occurrence at La Fontaine; whenever pupils don their plimsolls, French is what they expect to hear. Some music assemblies, too, have a distinctly Gallic flavour, while it's hoped cooking activities, healthy eating workshops, art and music classes conducted en français will be added soon. As the school grows, the aim is to increase the amount of French taught.

And that's not all – children benefit from three to four French lessons a week, each stretching to 30 minutes in duration. Considering La Fontaine must place the same focus on English, maths and science as other state-funded primaries, it's an impressive commitment, and one that has an impact: "It's not the case that children will learn to speak French fluently here – but they do learn to speak some French more quickly than they would in most schools," Sebastien

says. "We hope that by Year 6, children will be able to converse in French around themes relevant to their age, and understand announcements and so on. When we compare it to the English system this would be roughly approximate to GCSE level."

So that the hard work isn't wasted, thought is also being given to what awaits children beyond KS2. "We're hoping to set up a secondary school, so that we can continue to support children's language learning," Sebastien says. "We've started writing the bid, but have three years before our Year 4s get to Year 7, which gives us a bit of time. That's plan A. For plan B, I'm already talking to local secondary heads, to let them know that in three years they'll have a cohort of kids who will be bored if they're not taught languages in a way that stretches them. Those schools will have kids with EAL anyway, who may already speak French, so I'm sure they'll have things in place."

On the school's model of teaching languages, Sebastien identifies inspiration in his own educational experiences: "Between the ages of 14 and 17 I went to what's called a European High School in France. The method used there was known as CLIL – Content and Language Integrated Learning – which means teaching a language through a subject. So instead of doing pure English lessons, it was about learning English through geography, or history or maths.

"Although we do have 'French lessons', we're taking a similar approach here. It means the children don't realise they're learning French because it's always practical and relevant to them."

2 A shared vision

Building a school from scratch will always be a daunting proposition. Sebastien describes the "whirlwind of emotions" he experienced, and the "logistical nightmare" of operating with a skeletal crew during the early



DR SEBASTIEN CHAPLEAU, HEADTEACHER

"Ultimately our practices have to be judged against whether our neighbourhood has become safer, whether it has become happier. If it hasn't, then our curriculum is not fit for purpose."

days at La Fontaine – "I had to sweep the floor at lunchtime every day; if someone went on a course or was ill, it would be manic because that would be 20 per cent of the team not available..."

Of course, a fresh start also presents huge possibilities. "From a professional perspective, getting to develop the culture was absolutely great," Sebastien says. "There was no history or baggage. I didn't have to unpick or undo anything that had gone before, because there was nothing."

Although he had the power, Sebastien wasn't interested in creating a dictatorship: "I was employed before the school opened and my job was to turn a document approved by the DfE into a school. The vision, as it were, was mine – in terms of our curriculum, character building, family involvement. But I didn't want it to be led from the front. It had to be something we co-created. There's a huge argument at the moment between the 'architect' headteachers and the 'surgeon'

headteachers – the surgeons are leading on their own and not necessarily building a sustained vision. I'm hoping not to be that kind of headteacher.

"Establishing what the vision looked like in practice was done through a collective voice – and that was one of the key elements of our success. We had a very clear vision from day one, which the founding team really bought into and created with me. We managed to get a deferral from the Department for Education to not open on September 5th like most schools, which gave us two or three extra weeks to reflect on the school, its routines, values and principles, and to think about what they would look like in practice."

3 The three Cs

Language learning is the tip of the iceberg when it comes La Fontaine's vision. It's a simplification, but the school's approach can be neatly summed up in three Cs – creativity, character and community.



Pupil voice



Maria
I think it's important to speak another language so you can understand other people. It's also really exciting if you can go to a range of countries and meet new people, and learn new things. Different things happen in different countries."



Aston
"At Family Dining, my teacher found out that I like going on computers and doing ICT. I talk about computers to him. I like a game called Roadblocks because you can play with your friends even when you're not with them."



Dominic
"Learning French was difficult to begin with because I joined in the middle of Reception. But then I learnt how to say butterfly – 'un papillon'. And I've learnt how to say what my name is – Je m'appelle Dominic."



Yalom
"We're doing an exciting topic on The Iron Man. We're doing an animation where you take a picture, then move your model slightly and take another picture. Then at the end, the video shows the model moving like a cartoon."

"Creativity is one of our core values – we make sure everything the children do is fun," Sebastien says. There's at least one very practical reason for this – the school day at La Fontaine is 45 minutes longer than the norm, beginning at 8.30am and finishing at 3.30. "To begin with it's tiring for the children," he continues, "but after a few weeks they get used to it. We have them running through the gates in the morning because school is fun – to them, and from what they tell us, the more time they spend in school the better. The children feed back quite positively on the curriculum and their experience of learning."

Cs two and three are intertwined. Character encompasses the attitudes, behaviours and skills Sebastien and his team want to nurture in, and what they expect from, their pupils – think respect, self-esteem and the confidence to share one's opinions, qualities that are necessary to become a productive member of the community.

Sebastien points to sociologist Paul Tough when explaining the case for character education: "Tough argues strongly that hard skills – being able to count, read, write – will take you to the employer's door, but what gets you through the door is character. Can you speak confidently in an interview? Can you look someone in the eye? The number of kids in secondary who won't give you a firm handshake! Or just doing your tie up..."

"A lot of schools get that," he says, "but there is a disparity between talking the talk and walking the walk. What we've



reflected on is, if we believe our children should be respectful, what does that look like? If we believe they should take responsibility for themselves and for others, what does that look like?"

The school's Family Dining approach is a good example – prompted by a realisation that many children rarely ate their dinner at a table at home, and that the food they were offered wasn't always the healthiest, they made the decision to have children sit down to eat together for half an hour every day, and to only provide one food option, special dietary requirements aside.

"Being fussy is not an option," Sebastien says. "We served cabbage on the first day of family dining, and many children (and parents, when they found out later!) were

really shocked by that – but they all ate it because teachers were eating with them. They made it fun and interesting. It helps them to mature, to realise that in life, they'll have to go to dinner parties or meetings where they'll have to eat something they don't like. And that's okay. It's helping them understand that society expects certain things of us."

It's not just about meeting society's expectations, though. Sebastien and his team want their pupils to change their communities for the better, and through that make the world a better place. To get there, they want La Fontaine to present in microcosm a model for a better world. "The school is first and foremost about values and purpose. We want children to be leaders as well as learners," says Sebastien. "We often tell

them that our job is to make sure they don't just accept society for what it is.

"We're driven by our sense of moral purpose. We have a duty to make sure our school is a safe, nurturing environment, and that our neighbourhood learns from that and becomes better, safer and wealthier. Then the world at large becomes a better place for all. We want to move from a 'world as it is' to a 'world as it should be'."

4 Leadership & development

Sebastien isn't only interested in developing children's leadership – his desire to work in partnership with his team has meant an equally strong focus on staff development and autonomy. Teachers are fast-tracked into positions of authority, something he views as essential from the point of view of retention. He admits that working at La Fontaine isn't easy, but we hear how staff are being equipped to meet the expectations placed upon them.

"Effective CPD is about trust and enabling people to do things without being told to do them in a certain way," he tells us. "People need to own their area

of leadership, be it a subject, key stage or whatever. They need the freedom to try things and feed back, and develop things in their own way, as long as it fits within the bigger picture. That's where new ideas and improvements come from. If something doesn't work there's accountability and discussions about why, but it's done in a way that's nurturing and supportive. A culture of fear is something we've tried to avoid."

CPD is provided in distinct flavours, comprising a whole-school improvement plan, informal peer coaching, and formal coaching. The former sees all staff attending a session each week based on four 'Impact Initiatives', led by leaders working with Ambition School Leadership and given the freedom to develop their own CPD programme. These initiatives are developed over the course of the year, and currently take in SPAG, cross-curricular writing, maths mastery and SEN. "We try to discuss all the impact initiatives each week; it keeps people focused," Sebastien says.

Alongside this, there are the regular informal discussions – "professional conversations between staff", free of leadership involvement, as Sebastien describes it – and the more formal coaching delivered to individual teachers. "We have four coaches who visit a different member of staff once a week," he explains of the latter. "It's not someone they line manage, so there's no tension between whether the teacher is being managed or coached. Most weeks coaches will come in to see a teacher for 10 to 15 minutes. They're not there to give a judgement on the lesson; they only look at one aspect. The following week they will want to see that the teacher has put something in place on that particular aspect, and then they'll give another target. It's about marginal gains."

MEET THE STAFF



Andrew Hewitt, Year 4 Teacher

"I'm doing the Teaching Leaders programme, which means I have a few areas of responsibility. Surprisingly, I feel less pressure here than in previous jobs, even though my workload is greater. It's because of the support. If I'm unsure of anything, I can speak to Sarah or Claire. There's not really a gap between the SLT and the teaching staff. We all support each other."



Claire Mitchell, Assistant Head

"I feel like I have a good relationship with the people I coach. The conversations we have are positive and led by them. Because it's about small, incremental improvements, it's not a big, heavy experience. We chat about how things have gone, then identify something to work on. Then we come back next week and move forward. It's very consistent."



Sarah Edwards, Acting Assistant Head

"I think Seb wants us all to be on Future Leaders next year, which is the headship fast track. Everybody in the school – lunchtime staff, LSAs – has a leadership area. It's not just the teachers. Some people might lead on the library or the playground. Everyone is expected to step up. No one has left the school yet to take a leadership post elsewhere."



Beth Faherty, Year 2 Teacher

"We had a big staff meeting where we got to decide, as teachers, how we would like to receive feedback. What had we found worked and didn't work in previous schools; what made us feel comfortable. We weren't told, 'This is what's going to happen. Be in my room for 11am.' We all settled on what we were happy to do together."

REACHING OUT

A major part of La Fontaine's focus on instilling a sense of community both local and global into its pupils is a policy of developing strong links with home. Sebastien wants to build a 'village' – a network of families working together and reaching out to their neighbours. "We have to lead by example," Sebastien says of this ambition, "and that means relationships between teachers and parents have to be strong."

Practical steps taken to forge these links include regular dads and mums curry and quiz nights to foster a sense of togetherness, which Sebastien accepts isn't revolutionary; however, the school is

also developing a reputation for being able to offer support on the issues that matter: "So far we've been able to help each other with practical things like school runs, childcare, social events," Sebastien explains. "The next step is to become more 'political'. For instance, if 10 of our families had issues with housing, I feel that we would need to engage with this issue. If some of us are under pressure, we have a duty, as a community, to help them. 'What affects my neighbour affects me', I often tell our children in assembly. This is the mentality we aim to instil amongst everyone at La Fontaine."