

# Going Places

TS visits a secondary school where 'good' simply isn't good enough...



“There’s nothing like standing in front of a broken engine and knowing you have to fix it for putting education into context,” observes Tony Ryan, head teacher at Chiswick School, as we grab a quick cup of tea in his office before a day of classroom visits and meetings with the students and teachers who work and learn here. And he should know; at the age of 14, academically capable but utterly disengaged with a system that had let him slip through the cracks almost from the start, he sat in a careers interview and asked, with just a hint of belligerence, what he needed to become a car mechanic. ‘English, maths and one other’ was the succinct reply. He took art (“because the teacher was a bit of a hippy and let me smoke”), and with the requisite minimum qualifications under his belt, found himself a job with Fiat, where he stayed for seven years.

“I loved it. Wouldn’t change a thing,” he recalls, in a softly accented SW London voice that is almost spookily reminiscent of the BBC6 DJ, Steve Lamacq. “But by the end I’d worked myself up to management level, and through the process I

realised that learning could actually *mean* something. So when I saw an advert in the Evening Standard about training to be a teacher, it seemed like a good idea. The plan was never to stay in education – I was going to train and then go back into industry. The first time I ever stood in front of a group of kids, though, I thought, this is brilliant. It’s like painting a picture – you have this weird canvas in front of you, and you have to make something of it, and it’s beautiful. Now I don’t teach so much myself any more, and I miss it... but of course, as a head you have an even bigger canvas you can play with.”

Tony has been working on his current canvas, with the help of a talented and passionate team of staff, for three years now. As it happens, Chiswick is the school he would have attended had he not been steered by his well-meaning but, alas, mistaken parents into a Catholic establishment instead – he’s a local boy, and his understanding of the area, which presents a considerably more complex demographic than might be imagined from the imposing buildings and leafy streets that surround the school grounds, is right at the heart of his vision for the young people he serves.



“We do get kids from the local area who are living in £2 million houses – they come from very liberal, middle class backgrounds, and their parents have made a conscious decision to use the state system rather than pay for a private education,” he explains. “Quite rightly, they’ll only do that if they are confident that what we are offering their children is good enough. We’re situated on the edge of Hounslow, and the geography puts us on the borders of Ealing, Hammersmith and Fulham and Richmond. So we pull in pupils by bus from all those areas. We get a lot of Somalian youngsters from Ealing, for example – they’re great, often arriving with very little English, but the support at home is phenomenal, and once they pick up the language, they fly. Then there’s Shepherd’s Bush; we see a lot of kids from the White City estate. That’s a harder market; white, working-class, sometimes non-aspirational. Often these young people will be from families where two or three generations haven’t been in employment, but they’ll be fighting to break that cycle, and we’re determined to help them do it. Free school meals are at 49.6%, two thirds of the school are EAL... but of course,” he pulls himself up, firmly, “that’s just stats. They’re all children who need an education, and it doesn’t matter where they came from.”

It’s precisely this kind of clear, pragmatic assessment, and a

refusal to compromise on what might be achievable, that has informed Tony’s headship at Chiswick over the past three years – because when he arrived, in September 2010, he found a school that was definitely travelling in the right direction, but that still had a long way to go.

“The previous head did a really good job of arresting the slide,” he points out. “He put a lot of the basics in place – if you go back further, the stories are quite horrific, with behaviour completely out of control. A lot of the current staff members were here then, and what they say about the transition is remarkable. By the time I was appointed, though, the school was satisfactory, and definitely heading the right way. My job, as I saw it, was to gel the staff toward longer term visions, because at that point, it was all about the next set of exam results. And the longer term aim has always been what it says in our school motto: ‘achieving excellence.’”

Together with his senior team, middle leaders, teaching staff, student council and parent groups, Tony’s first self-imposed task as head teacher of Chiswick School (or Chiswick Community School as it was then – it converted to Academy status last year) was to draw up a three-year strategic plan that combined an overall mission statement with an extremely specific, timed programme of action detailing what would be done, and by when, in order to move from ‘good’ to ‘outstanding’ by the end of 2015. It was divided into three areas: teaching and learning, student engagement, and buildings improvement – and the whole thing can be printed onto four sheets of A4 paper, with plenty of pictures and generous font sizes. Conversion to Academy status was an essential part of the process, partly to release funds, but mostly to ensure total autonomy. There is no partner or chain involved – Chiswick is proudly independent, and its definition of ‘outstanding’ goes somewhat further than Ofsted’s, too. Everyone is working towards the provision of a ‘world class education’, in a school of which teachers and students alike can be thoroughly proud.

With no multi-million pound sponsorship on the horizon, plans for improving the environment have necessarily had to be extremely carefully planned and prioritised. Certain, large-scale works, such as overhauling the extremely poor heating and ventilation system and replacing ancient windows are being scheduled in immediately; however, the replacement of the hideous ‘new block’, designed in the bleak architectural desert of the 1970s, will have to happen further down the road, so in the meantime, the stark expanses of concrete, grim staircases and mysterious backstage spaces are being transformed with the innovative use of student artwork, including murals and shots from the school’s superb photography department. Largely cosmetic transformations have been introduced where they are likely to have the most wide-reaching impact on student life – the library is now a stylish and inviting space where learners can sit quietly and read or study, follow the Accelerated Reader programme, and have break-out sessions with their teachers and peers; the main hall is properly appointed for assemblies and performance; and the canteen, renamed the Dining Hall, has had a complete makeover along with the appointment of a new catering company, and is open from 8am to 4pm daily for the use of staff and students (it’s particularly popular with the sixth form, who can drop in for a coffee and a chat about their studies, away from the hubbub of the common rooms). The idea is that anywhere can become a learning space. “I’ve recently started finding little groups with iPads in the corridors,” Tony says. “My first instinct was to move them on – but if it’s working for them, then that’s where they need to be.”

The introduction of iPads, indeed, is another development that’s being cautiously, but determinedly, introduced at Chiswick. Tony is both enthusiastic and knowledgeable about IT, and keen to bring computing technology out of designated



“THE STAFF ARE GETTING VERY USED TO THE KIDS COMING IN KNOWING ANSWERS THEY HAVEN’T ASKED QUESTIONS FOR. WE’RE LEARNING WITH THE STUDENTS, WHICH IS WHY WE PLACE SO MUCH IMPORTANCE ON THE OPENING MINDS CURRICULUM IN YEAR 7”  
**HEAD TEACHER**  
**TONY RYAN**



EXTRA-CURRICULAR ACTIVITIES ARE EXTREMELY IMPORTANT AT CHISWICK SCHOOL, AS A WAY OF EXTENDING STUDENTS' EXPERIENCES, PERHAPS INTO AREAS THAT THEY MIGHT NOT OTHERWISE DISCOVER. WHETHER IT'S BOXING CLUB, FOOTBALL COACHING OR THE THRIVING THEATRE GROUP, THE PLAN IS THAT BY THE ACADEMIC YEAR 2014/15, ALL LEARNERS WILL BE TAKING PART IN AT LEAST ONE EXTRA-CURRICULAR ACTIVITY A WEEK.

all equally valued and supported. Everyone has something that they are good at, and it's our job as educators to help them find that thing and grow it. We're big on resilience, too – there's no 'I can't' here. It's not that you 'can't' do maths, it's just that you don't want to put in the effort that it will take you to do it. We live in a world where if something is a bit challenging, it's almost expected that you will just give up – and that's wrong. I think school's place is to help young people push through those barriers, because there's so much more joy when you succeed in the difficult things. That's where contextualising is so important – we have to give children a *reason* to do the hard things, and that's why part of our transformation here has involved hiring a full time careers advisor, and building up strong links with local businesses. Because let's be honest – I wouldn't be walking into a job with three GCSEs if I were leaving school this year."

No one at Chiswick is resting on his or her laurels. Even Tony himself is sweating over weekly saxophone lessons in order to fulfil a promise made last year to play a tune in assembly despite never having picked up an instrument in his life – and those students who tend naturally to excel academically are being pushed just as far beyond their comfort zones as those who need extra support to hit national targets, thanks to The Brilliant Club, a not for profit organisation that places PhD students in secondary schools and sixth form colleges where aspirations for higher education are not traditionally ambitious. Through a series of small group tutorials, culminating in the requirement to produce an undergraduate standard dissertation, outstanding pupils are encouraged to develop the knowledge, skills, confidence and drive needed to secure places at top universities. They have to apply for a chance to participate, and in the 18 months that the programme has been running at Chiswick, competition amongst students from years 9, 10 and 12 to sign up for this hefty chunk of extra work has been fierce.

"My group studied developmental neurobiology; how the brain develops in the womb and later on," explains Jasmine Ketch-Neumann (Y10), whose dissertation gained her a First (despite biology being "not nearly as logical" as her first love, chemistry), which was presented to her, along with fellow participants, in a ceremony held at Oxford University. "It looked daunting at first, and I wasn't sure I'd be able to do the work, but then you get home and start to do the research, and it all begins to take shape."

"I definitely feel I have a better understanding of the subject now, and I'm writing more sophisticated essays as part of my normal work," says Moi Lanne Wetzel, a year 9 student who has been weighing the evidence in favour of the monomyth theory in English literature. "Once you start thinking a certain way," she adds, with a smile, "you just can't stop!" It's probably a bit late to add this last observation to the Chiswick School's logo... but as a summation of what is happening there, in truth, it's hard to think of anything more apt.



'suites', and across the curriculum generally. Staff members already have iPads, and are encouraged to use them in the classroom as well as for data and time management, and there are a further 220 devices that can be booked out for any lesson, which are rarely not in use.

Walking around the school, and seeing lessons in action, it's clear that this is a place that's powered with positivity. There's a very obvious culture of striving to achieve; unusually, perhaps, it's genuinely cool to succeed, whether that means proudly wearing a badge indicating that you've taken one or more GCSEs early; having your artwork on display; or being celebrated for your sporting, theatrical or musical prowess. And there's no obvious segregation either – children from the estates share jokes with those whose parents own an estate; academic high flyers work with those who are struggling; girls and boys sit naturally side by side; and the various ethnicities are all easily intermingled.

"It's about reminding kids that they can aspire beyond what they might have first expected," states Tony Ryan. "We give them the freedom to choose from a range of paths, but they're

