

Mandarin Chinese at Melbourn Village College

Melbourn Village College (MVC) is a 500 strong 11-16 state-funded secondary school in the picturesque village of Melbourn, Cambridgeshire. MVC is in its second year of teaching Chinese as part of the standard curriculum and has been part of the Department for Education's Mandarin Excellence Programme (MEP) for the last six months. The MEP is delivered by the IOE Confucius Institute for Schools. For a school with a very short history of teaching Chinese, students are excelling in the language so much so that the school's Ofsted Report for 2016/17 mentioned the teaching of Mandarin at the school five times; each time in a very positive light. Ofsted indicated in its report that Mandarin Chinese is a subject which greatly benefits MVC, and through its introduction it considers MVC to be 'forward-thinking in adapting the curriculum to suit the needs of the 21st Century'. The school motto 'Everybody is Somebody' is felt through the report and throughout the school, which is very welcoming and full of confident, friendly students.

Intrigued by their Ofsted report and success of Chinese at the school, I travelled to Melbourn to meet with Principal, Mr Simon Holmes and Chinese teacher, Mr Frank Fan, to discuss everything Chinese at MVC.

Melbourn Village College Principal Mr Holmes

Mr Holmes, a Maths teacher by training, has been with MVC for eighteen years and has been the Principal for the past six years. We meet in his office, which has large windows looking out to the central grassy 'Willow Lawn', giving a feeling of openness to the school. Here Mr Holmes tells me the story of how MVC successfully introduced Mandarin onto the curriculum less than two years ago and is now a strong member of the MEP.

Mr Holmes explains that before doing Chinese, MVC had been a very traditional school in terms of languages. Students would study French in year 7, most would add German in year 8, and there was a choice of the two for GCSE. Seven years ago, the current Deputy Principal, Regina Lawrence, launched an additional Spanish GCSE option, with students taking the GCSE after only two years' study. Mr Holmes and the school found that Spanish soon established itself as a popular and successful GCSE option; students enjoyed the fact that it was slightly unusual and a more useful language to study. MVC listened to their students and decided to move Spanish into Key Stage 3 and drop German from the curriculum. This situation continued until a curriculum review led to the beginnings of teaching Chinese.

The full curriculum review was jointly led by the school Senior Leadership Team and new Chair of Governors, Sue Williamson, in 2016 with support from the Schools Students and Teachers Network (SSAT), of which she is Chief Executive. All agreed that if they were to start a new school from scratch, the two languages they would want to offer would be Spanish and Chinese. The school also benefits from having IOE Confucius Institute Director Katharine Carruthers on its Board of Governors, along with Hans Van de Ven, Professor of Modern Chinese History at St Catharine's College, Cambridge, a combination which MVC felt provided a good support network to bring Mandarin Chinese to their students. Before introducing Mandarin, Mr Holmes and the school agreed that it was necessary to do a lot of relevant research to gauge whether Chinese was the right subject for them. MVC

researched schools in the area that had also introduced Chinese to see what their experiences had been. Mr Holmes and Dr Rachel Hawkes, who is responsible for education with an international outlook at the school's multi-academy trust, visited schools including Harris Academy South Norwood to observe Chinese lessons and speak to Chinese teachers. Mr Holmes tells me that this research was invaluable to their decision to introduce Mandarin as a subject option to the MVC Yr 7s.

It was determined early on by the school and the Board of Governors that to be successful in the introduction of Chinese, finding the right Chinese teacher was fundamental to the cause. As well as advertising the position of Mandarin teacher at MVC and inviting applicants to apply for the post, Mr Holmes and his deputy Regina travelled to the IOE in February 2016 to meet with Katharine Carruthers' cohort of Mandarin PGCE students. The purpose of going to London to meet directly with the students was so that MVC could get across to prospective teachers exactly the kind of person they would need for this particular teaching post; a teacher who would be comfortable setting up Mandarin from scratch in a school with no prior teaching of it. A number of the students subsequently applied for the job and, after a full interview process, Mr Holmes and Regina felt that Frank Fan (Mr Fan) was the one they wanted for the job and he happily accepted the position.

After MVC found the right Chinese teacher, the school needed to make sure that the attitude of parents and students towards Mandarin was a positive one. Mr Holmes tells us that parents have been keen for their children to take Chinese in Yr 7 and if they are worried about their child potentially struggling with Chinese, the school explains that progress in Chinese is slower to begin with due to the characters and tones, but that students accelerate the further they go with it. Mr Holmes adds that his pupils love having the opportunity to learn Mandarin and are very positive about the whole experience, which is also echoed in the Ofsted Report as the inspector notes "Pupils told me that they felt privileged to learn Mandarin." The school believes that the 2017 Ofsted report is an accurate portrayal of the school and reflects its real attitudes and practices. Mr Holmes is particularly happy about the positive student comments in the context of Mandarin, as it is a new subject to the school and there were obvious worries that the introduction of it might not have worked as well as it did. For the school, it is very pleasing to see from the comments in the Ofsted report that introducing Mandarin has been a success and it leads MVC to anticipate Chinese being successful going forward.

The success of Chinese at MVC can be further seen as the school is now in its first year of the Mandarin Excellence Programme (MEP); a potentially daunting prospect for a school that only introduced Chinese on curriculum in 2016. However, Mr Holmes believes that if Chinese is right for MVC students, then the MEP is right for MVC students; that the introduction of Chinese into the curriculum is about giving the students more opportunity, and being part of the MEP is about furthering this opportunity. According to Mr Holmes, recruiting students for the programme has not been a challenge as initially thought, and there is now a waiting list due to so many students being interested in the programme. Mr Holmes is very aware that the MEP can make students feel part of something special and he says that a challenge for him and Mr Fan's to make sure that the students who are doing Chinese, but not on the MEP, also feel special and valued. To ensure this, the school intends to offer extra opportunities to these students and will actively encourage them to take the Chinese GCSE at Key Stage 4. The school also gets involved in other China-related programmes, such as participating in a programme that enables the school to host students from China for eight weeks during which they attend classes at MVC. MVC has also



recently taken on an IOE Mandarin PGCE student which has given Mr Fan extra support, as well as supporting the IOE. Moving forwards, the school has further developments planned; a second Chinese teacher will be employed from September 2018 and a Confucius classroom application is on the way. The ways in which Mr Holmes and his team at MVC have introduced Chinese as a subject so successfully is something that is very inspiring to many other schools and is indeed shown in the Ofsted Report. MVC is very pleased and proud of doing Mandarin, but they are also very conscious of making sure it is not the only positive thing that the school is known for because it is not the only thing the school does well. Mr Holmes feels that Mandarin at MVC is an example of what the school does when it thinks that something is right for them. The school's impressive progress on the MEP is another example of MVC pursuing something that is right for them and doing it well. Considering these successes, I decided to ask Mr Holmes what advice MVC has for those schools thinking of introducing Mandarin in their school. Here's what he had to say:

- Do your research - give yourself time to think about how and where Chinese fits in with other languages at your school.
- Contact other schools doing Chinese – Find other schools doing Chinese or those on the MEP. Go and visit these schools, talk to them about how they are delivering Chinese, what they've learned and sit in on their Chinese lessons.
- Seek support – MVC would not have pursued Chinese as a subject if they felt they were completely alone in the task. One of the school governors, Hans Van de Ven, has been keen to do Chinese at MVC for a long time. Having Katharine Carruthers as a contact who could provide the support of the IOE CI was also very helpful.
- Get involved – Find things that are Chinese related. MVC has taken part in the HSBC speaking competition and a programme based in St Neots that places Chinese students into English schools for an 8 week period in spring and summer terms.
- Keep pushing forward with it and perhaps most importantly, continue to think of all the different ways the school can support its Chinese teacher.
- Go for it!

Chinese Teacher at Melbourn Village College, Mr Fan

I meet Mr Fan in his classroom which is decorated with photographs of everything Chinese from modern and old photographs of Shanghai, to pictures of Chinese martial artists and Chinese cuisine to examples of his students' excellent Chinese character writing.

Mr Fan is a very humorous and fascinating man who is incredibly enthusiastic about teaching Chinese. He was born in Xinjiang province to Shanghainese parents and tells me some highly amusing stories about his 10 day journey from his hometown to Shanghai at the age of 17. When I sit in on one of his lessons, he weaves similar funny stories about China into his teaching, which leave students listening with anticipation and laughing all the way through. Prior to becoming a teacher, Mr Fan was a businessman in China; however, according to Mr Fan himself, the 2008 economic crises highlighted his lack of business skills

and so he decided to embark on a change in career. After spending time casually teaching English to the children of his friends, Mr Fan realised he wanted to become a qualified teacher. He wanted to train as a Chinese teacher in the UK, so through Schools Direct Frank studied for his PGCE at the IOE, training at Grey Court School in Richmond and graduating in 2016.

Frank started teaching at MVC in the same year he graduated from his PGCE. Setting up Chinese from scratch during his first year at the school gave him the opportunity to create an assessment framework and a solid scheme of work that will endure at the school for years to come. He also spent much of his first year building up teaching resources and adjusting his teaching style to the students at MVC. Mr Fan says that due to the supportive nature of the staff and Principal at the school, Mandarin has been able to flourish and the addition of an IOE Mandarin PGCE student has also been very helpful for him, as she has been helping teach two of the MEP lessons per week.

MVC is a small village college serving a number of local rural villages. For the students, who are predominantly white British, the cultural insights and experiences that a native Chinese teacher such as Mr Fan can bring, are especially valuable in providing a wider context for their language learning. Parents can be worried about their children learning Chinese because they know nothing about the language and so cannot help their children with their homework, as they could with other subjects, including the more traditional languages such as French and German. However, Mr Fan asks parents to see this from another point of view; he says it is time for children to have the opportunity to teach their parents something and in doing this, they gain more confidence in the subject. Mr Fan recognises that Chinese can be a difficult language to learn in the beginning stages; however, he knows that these difficulties can be overcome with plenty of practice. This is why he actively encourages his students to come to his classroom for homework feedback and to practice speaking with him in Mandarin. When entering Mr Fan's classroom, known to the students as the 'Great Wall of China', it is a rule that they must speak Chinese and Mr Fan enjoys creating an environment where the students are not afraid to interact with him and each other in Mandarin. He tells me that as the students recognise that Mandarin is a difficult language, when they master it they feel a real sense of achievement in themselves and their abilities.

The MEP has been very good for the school with Mr Fan explaining that the programme allows students to gain a deeper knowledge of Chinese language and culture, as they are given the time to go much further with their learning. Mr Fan is very happy with the progress of both his MEP and non-MEP students and certainly when I see their Chinese compositions, the Chinese character writing is very impressive from all students. Mr Fan is very positive about the future of Mandarin at MVC and believes that the students at the school will do very well compared to most Mandarin school learners in the UK. When watching Mr Fan's lesson, I can certainly see why he is so positive, as his students are lively and interested in his class, as well as having excellent pronunciation and comprehension. After reading the Ofsted Report and observing a Chinese lesson, it is difficult to believe that MVC has only been teaching Chinese for a comparatively short time. However, after speaking to Mr Holmes and Mr Fan, I can understand how the research, the right teacher and support from the school has made Chinese at MVC a real success, contributing to the happiness of the students and the ongoing development of the school.