PYP Drop-In #2 – Parent Questions

What is different each year in the transdisciplinary theme so children are not bored?
Each year a completely different issue is investigated under each theme. In fact the expectation is that once something has been studied we do not repeat it in another grade. It must be noted here that units are studied in depth. Rather than studying a whole range of topics in a year at a surface level, the idea in the PYP is to study them in far greater depth in order to develop a deep and thorough understanding.
“Understanding means more than just recalling. It means the learner has “wrapped around an important idea, has incorporated it accurately into his or her inventory of how things work. The learner owns the idea.” (Tomlinson)

Who chooses the units of inquiry?
Each school chooses the units of inquiry, dependent on the needs of the students, the school community and the cultural setting. What is relevant in one school context may not be at all relevant in another and what is significant and engaging to one group of students may not be significant and engaging to others. It must be remembered that it is not the “topic” that is important, it is the acquisition of skills and attitudes and the deep understanding of the concepts. These skills, attitudes and concepts are the same for all schools; we have no choice in that regard. Once students have mastered the skills and really understood the concepts they can apply them to any topic.

Do they not need to know the basic building blocks?
Absolutely! And they do learn the basics; you can be assured that we have not ‘thrown out the baby with the bathwater’. The question is, “What are the basic building blocks?” The emphasis has changed because the needs of our learners today are very, very different to what the needs were on the past.

What about the individual learner?
This is something at the forefront of our minds and the PYP forces us more than ever to consider the needs of the individual. It is no longer a case of ‘one size fits all’; one of the biggest challenges for all teachers, particularly given the size of our classes. Children’s readiness for learning varies, especially in the lower grades, and so it is normal that they will not all accelerate at the same speed. In the classroom we acknowledge that and work with it. Teachers always begin any new unit by finding out what the students’ prior knowledge and understanding is. We no longer assume that; we actively seek to find out and then plan from there, rather than going over what a student already knows or moving on when there are obvious gaps.
We now place a greater focus on formative assessment so we can determine a student’s needs well before any summative assessment occurs and can address those needs on an individual or group basis.
You should be starting also to notice that summative assessment tasks often provide options for students — the expected outcome is exactly the same for all students but they can opt to show their understanding in different ways. Learning centres are common, particularly in the younger grade levels where students can engage in activities with other like-minded students. Differentiation is an ongoing discussion as we work towards making it happen in a way that is beneficial for every student and yet manageable for teachers.

I’ve heard from parents with older children that in the Lower School there is no homework, but all of a sudden in Upper School there is so much homework children have a hard time adjusting. Is this accurate? Is there a transition period?

No, this is not accurate and is based on a misunderstanding about the changes we made to our Lower School Homework Policy around 18 months ago. We reviewed the issue of homework because we noticed our students were spending inordinate amounts of time every night, on weekends and on holidays doing schoolwork. Much it was just busy work, homework for the sake of doing homework, often with little or no value. Many students were also being tutored, going to Kumon, sports coaching etc, all on top of a huge homework load. They didn’t have the chance to know how to use leisure time, if indeed they had any, and they had little balance in their lives.

Research showed that at elementary school level homework makes little difference to learning, hence the changes to our policy. Yes, there will be times when no homework is set but for the most part students will do homework four nights per week (grade level X 10 minutes ie 60 mins per night for Grade 6). It will be meaningful, relevant to classroom learning and have a set purpose. At Grade 7 and 8, homework is set for 1-2 hrs per night and may include weekend homework.

Should you require further clarification please see your child’s teacher in the first instance.

When is my child going to learn Maths?

Students are learning Maths every day but it is in a different context and in a very different way to what they have been used to in the past. It’s certainly different to what other generations have been used to! And here the problem lies.

So what are the major changes?

1. Nowadays Maths is not usually confined to isolated blocks of time during the day. Instead it is taught in context, in a way that allows students to see how it is used to make real world connections and solve real world problems. Students learn about the world through Maths, rather than learning Maths for the sake of it.

2. Maths is not taught using a textbook or worksheets. Instead it is taught using a range of resources that fully support a set scope and sequence of concepts and content that is followed across the school. Our role is to prepare students for a life that makes use of mathematics, not just to focus on preparation for the next level of Maths. We
need to provide students with the process tools of mathematics and to see those tools are used to solve real-world problem. (Erickson)

3. The focus is not on repeating a process over and over until the steps are known. Assessment is not based on a single test where only the “right” answer is used to determine an overall grade. Such a method meant in the past, that many students saw Maths simply as a subject taught in school for the purpose of getting good grades. As long as they arrived at the right answer it didn’t matter if there was real understanding or not. Students often did not see the relevance of what they were learning and so many became disengaged.

The focus now is as much on the process as on the answer. Many tasks are open-ended rather than having one set answer and they involve multi-steps in order to find a solution. Those steps do not always involve computation; nevertheless it is still Maths. Students learn there are many different strategies to solve problems, not just a single one. They learn to consider which is the best strategy to solve a given problem. They are expected to go beyond the answer to explain their thinking to justify why they chose certain strategies. Hence, real understanding is developed and is evident.

This is the area of Maths that many students find the most challenging. It can be frustrating for those who have considered themselves good students in the past but are now out of their comfort zone because the demand for higher order thinking instead of rote learning means they may struggle more than in the past.

What is being put in place in the PYP is providing the building blocks for your children to be successful when they encounter the demands of the MYP. As students move into the Middle Years Programme, yes, they will focus on concepts and content but they will also be assessed on: knowledge and understanding, investigating patterns, communication in maths, reflection in maths.