



The Big Understanding

From Melanie Smith, educator, International School of Amsterdam

"I want learning to be fun for the students...to create memories... and learn things in my class that they will be able to take on into projects in after school clubs, at home, in their next grade, on holiday... so everything they learn is about transferable learning and transferable understanding."

Melanie is celebrating 15 years at the International School of Amsterdam in the Netherlands, and has enjoyed roles right across the school from kindergarten to PYP coordinator. Now back in the classroom, Melanie joined us to talk about her passion for concept-based inquiry, sharing some magical moments of PYP learning and some practical tips for supporting both students and educators with the 'concept' of concepts!

Listen to learn more about how Melanie enables her students to make the connections between existing knowledge and new learning across the year, and how key and related concepts can transfer across units of inquiry and into everyday life.

Melanie's practical tips:

Before collaboratively planning your unit of inquiry – ask yourselves these questions:

- What do we want the students to learn? What are our lines of inquiry and what are the important concepts within those lines of inquiry?
- Do we have strong, concept-based central ideas?
- How can we build a flexible schedule to allow for those unexpected moments, ensuring enough time for the children to inquire into what they want to inquire into?

During your unit of inquiry:

- Try sometimes keeping the central idea hidden from students at the start – and as they develop their key and related concepts, allow them to come up with their central idea.
- Reflect regularly on the key and related concepts – are they still valid for the current inquiry?
- Invite parents or people from your local community to explain big ideas and inspire learning.



Visual aids:

- Create two laminated concept bank posters – invite students to add and remove key and related concepts as the unit progresses
- Create a laminated key for each key concept – with definition/example on the back
- The children love my 'Happy Dance' every time they come up with a new important word for our concept bank – why not try something similar?

Melanie's No.1 tip!

Constantly use the terminology of concepts with students - even the youngest children - eg "Big idea" or "big understanding". You will be surprised how quickly the 'concept' of concepts is absorbed into their daily life!

Further reading:

Melanie would like to credit the book *Concept-Based Inquiry in Action* by Rachel French and Carla Marschall for the learning that inspired this podcast.

The idea for concept keys/poster was inspired by the work of Harvard Project Zero and their [Visible Thinking Routines](#). Credits: Debbie O Hara, Stephanie Martin and [Ron Ritchhart](#).

Link to [Concepts](#) and teacher support material [Inquiry in action](#), from *PYP: From principles into Practice*.

