Keystone Academy is one of China’s flagship schools. It is a private Chinese school with an international flavour. It is bilingual and state-of-the-art, drawing from the best of Chinese, American and international learning approaches; focusing on inquiry-based learning, critical thinking and creative problem solving within a rigorous international environment.

The school, located in Beijing, opened in September 2014 and has been using the International Primary Curriculum (IPC) since. It is expanding year on year and there are currently around 530 students in the primary school (Foundation to Grade 5), and 406 students in the middle and high school, with Grade 11 opening this year (2016-2017). Most of the students are Chinese although there are a growing number of international students from the United States, Europe and Africa, particularly in the senior school. There are both expatriate English-speaking teachers, and Chinese teachers.

Children progress from the IPC in primary, to the International Baccalaureate’s Middle Years Programme (MYP) in middle school, and the IB Diploma Programme in high school. Here, Assistant Head of Primary School and IPC Coordinator, Gary Bradshaw describes the impact of learning with the IPC on students and staff.

In preparation for opening, we researched in depth the programmes and curricula to run at Keystone. Having selected the MYP and the IBDP, the leadership team looked for a primary curriculum to prepare children in the best possible way. While the IB PYP (International Baccalaureate Primary Years Programme) was considered, it was a very conscious decision to go with the IPC instead, and was chosen for several important reasons.

We wanted a primary curriculum that could be adapted to meet the needs of our children and our teachers. As Keystone was a brand new school, the IPC was a good choice as it supplied a complete curriculum; not just a framework, but a curriculum with suggested learning tasks, so teachers new to the IPC could hit the ground running. Everything’s there for teachers; all you need to do is open it up and follow it.
Our school licence allows us to use the curricula we deem most appropriate and it means we have much more flexibility than most of the national schools. Our bilingual immersion programme runs through the primary school, which means we have a mix of Chinese teachers and international English-speaking teachers (approximately 60% of our primary staff are Chinese teachers). The children in Foundation and Grade 1 spend 70% of the week in Chinese classes, and 30% in English. So we have two Chinese teachers to one English-speaking teacher in the lower primary grades. From Grades 2 to 5, the mix is around 50% Chinese to 50% native English-speaking staff.

We have chosen to adopt the Chinese national standards and curriculum for Mathematics and Chinese Language Arts, but have moulded the way we deliver the learning. From Grades 2 to 5, we also teach supplementary Mathematics in English in order to prepare the children for middle school Mathematics, which at Keystone is taught in English only.

Importantly though, as well as the detailed framework, there’s also flexibility which means that we are able to adapt it for our requirements. Being a Chinese school with a bilingual immersion programme, the IPC lent itself well to being taught in both English and in Chinese.

During the school’s inception phase, our leadership team visited a number of schools in the United States and here in China. When visiting IPC schools, they were really wowed by what they saw. They loved the fact that it was so fun, student friendly and learning focused. However, there were no other schools in China doing what we wanted to do with the IPC; using it in an immersed way with both Chinese and English speaking teachers, so we knew we were taking a risk.

We often get asked about our choice of primary curriculum, and how we ensure continuity between the different curricula. The IPC and MYP are not that dissimilar; they have the same fundamental principles of inquiry, international mindedness and a focus on learning. As a result, we felt the IPC prepared children well for the challenges of the MYP curriculum through middle school.

Our Primary School

Parents send their children to our school for various reasons. The fact that we are bilingual is a big attraction. For many of our parents, what is important is that the school prepares their child well for university or college in the United States or UK. Others are frustrated with the Chinese education system and what their child has to go through. They want their child to be both successful and happy at school, and able to think creatively and independently.

Many people assume we are an international school, but we are actually a local private Chinese school with a Chinese licence, and as such we have to follow Chinese regulations and guidelines. However, the Chinese education department is quite generous and open to what we’re doing.
Wushu (Chinese martial arts), Chinese Music and Chinese Drama. These classes, which have a Chinese cultural and linguistic thread, are delivered in Chinese. Our aim is to link the IPC to as many of these subjects as we can.

**Bilingual Learning with the IPC**

We deliver the IPC in both English and Chinese. IPC time is allocated within the timetable for the English-speaking teachers and the Chinese-speaking teachers. Through collaborative planning, we decide what is going to be covered in English and Chinese. The IPC at times can be very research heavy and the language needs of the particular learning experience may help to determine the language of instruction for that particular learning. For example, it may be easier for the younger children to research in their native language and at times some of the more practical and hands-on elements may be delivered by the English-speaking teachers. We do not take a translation approach, so no tasks or content are ever delivered twice.

This method does of course come with its challenges. For example, because of the demands of the different languages, we are still figuring out the best way to plan collaboratively, and to get new teachers up to speed quickly. I worked with a Chinese-speaking Maths teacher last year, and she had Google translated all of the grade level’s IPC units! That’s ok; you get the general idea, but it’s not the same as deeply understanding it in your own language. We have to make sure that everyone is on the same page with his or her understanding of the IPC.

Our teachers do come from very different pedagogical backgrounds, with, at times, quite different teaching methodologies. If you look at a typical English-speaking classroom, you will often find children on the floor, huddled together in groups or pairs. There will be lots of chatter, lots of questioning and learning is happening all over the place. In a typical Chinese classroom, you may however find the children are all sitting up straight at their desks with hands raised politely in a very ordered and systematic way.

Some of our Chinese teachers are not used to delivering the creative and independent learning approach demanded by the IPC. They are also not used to having so much flexibility with the curriculum.

The Chinese Language Arts curriculum is very demanding and is very prescriptive and Chinese-speaking teachers often find it a challenge to find links to the IPC theme, or find time to develop those links further. Our English-speaking teachers are more able to draw on and link learning to the IPC themes outside specific IPC times. That’s the way learning works best.

Because there is no mandated Chinese curriculum until grade 1, our Foundation teachers have been afforded more flexibility in their teaching and learning, and are having great success with the IPC. They have embraced it incredibly well and are doing some beautiful stuff!

Despite the different perspectives, we are making good progress as we pull the Chinese and the Western elements together. Here at Keystone we want to be able to take from the best of both and develop our own unique pedagogy and practice based on the richness of both Chinese and western cultural perspectives.

We have established grade-level teams to help with the planning and to provide the best support for every member of the team. As a grade-level team, the teachers carefully plan each IPC thematic unit to ensure relevant coverage for all the subjects. This leads to better conceptual coordination across subjects. Following the team planning, and with the support of the IPC’s suggested learning tasks, which use a wide range of applications for both researching and recording the learning, the teachers then individually prepare their own engaging, learning-focused activities for their lessons.

The IPC is also helping our teachers to deliver challenging and fun learning. The fun part is the tricky part for our parents who find it hard to make the important connection between learning and fun.

"Because there is no mandated Chinese curriculum until grade 1, our Foundation teachers have been afforded more flexibility in their teaching and learning."
We have a WeChat account where we regularly post articles about the IPC, and how and what our children are learning. We also have a newsletter, which talks about the IPC units that are going on, and we publish a magazine twice a year, which focuses on the learning that’s taking place here at Keystone. All of these avenues help to educate our current and prospective parents about our school, our philosophy and the IPC.

Overall, our parents are very supportive about how the children are learning with the IPC. In a recent parent survey, 86% of them were positive about the learning approach at Keystone.

International mindedness should not be an additional, separate subject, but something that is developed naturally within the whole school community and ethos as well as in the learning. At Keystone, we have teachers who come from all over the world and we are very international in our thinking.

Within the learning, it’s something that the IPC does well. The IPC units help address international mindedness implicitly. Because most of our children are Chinese, we approach our learning through Chinese culture and identity but also within the wider world context. We have to be conscious to look at our learning globally, but also to look within.

When it comes to developing personal attributes, we focus on the Keystone five values of Compassion, Justice, Respect, Wisdom and Honesty, which are at the core of our school. Within these values we align the IPC personal goals; there’s nothing that doesn’t fit. It is so important to have these values as part of our school and they are practiced within everything we do here; in learning activities as part of the IPC, as well as in our wider school life. With so many busy and professional parents, the need for our school to help the children develop these skills is essential.

Our parents also tend to focus on the English language and we have to help them realise that their child is here to learn through the language of English, not simply to learn the language. We also have to show them that rigorous learning can also mean having fun in the classroom.

Most parents don’t fully grasp the IPC, and this only changes when we educate them. When the teachers sit down with the parents and open their child’s portfolio, they are impressed. They start to see that their child’s learning can happen in many different ways. The same happens when parents come to student-led conferences or to IPC exit points, where they can see the results of learning, and are able to hear their child talk about their learning. We’ve had many parents leave amazed, with their mouths agape!

These events not only allow parents to see the learning that’s going on, but also helps them to understand and see that the IPC keeps their child excited and motivated about learning. Involving the parents; allowing them to see their child in action also helps them to understand more about the curriculum.

The more we communicate with our parents about how and what their children are learning, the happier our parents are.
Supporting a Cultural Shift

China is changing its mindset to learning, and beginning to look outward. The fact that the IPC is an international curriculum that is flexible and adaptable is a real strength for schools here in China and elsewhere. Because of that, it can fit well with virtually any curriculum including the Chinese national curriculum.

The IPC is also student-centred and learning-focused which is so important. Until now, many schools haven’t focused enough on the learning. With the IPC, it’s all about the learning! It’s helping all of our teachers to make learning the focus.

You can read more about the IPC at Keystone Academy in articles written by Keystone teachers for various school publications here:

Unpacking the IPC – The Entry Point
Unpacking the IPC – The Knowledge Harvest
Unpacking the IPC – The Exit Point
The International Primary Curriculum’s growing learning community includes schools in more than 90 countries around the world. Learning with the IPC means that children focus on a combination of academic, personal and international learning that is both exciting and challenging.

The aim of the IPC is to help every child enjoy learning a wide range of subjects and to develop an enquiring mind, the personal attributes that will help throughout teenage and adult years, and to develop a sense of their own nationality and culture, whilst developing a profound respect for the nationalities and cultures of others. Through the IPC approach to learning, children develop the knowledge, skills and understanding necessary to confidently face the world of tomorrow.

The IPC was introduced in 2000 and its continued development today ensures that children are learning a current and highly relevant curriculum based on the very latest research and understanding of how children learn.

The IPC is a part of Fieldwork Education which, since 1984, has been helping schools all around the world to develop children’s learning.

For more information about the International Primary Curriculum visit www.greatlearning.com/ipc