

INTERDISCIPLINARY LEARNING

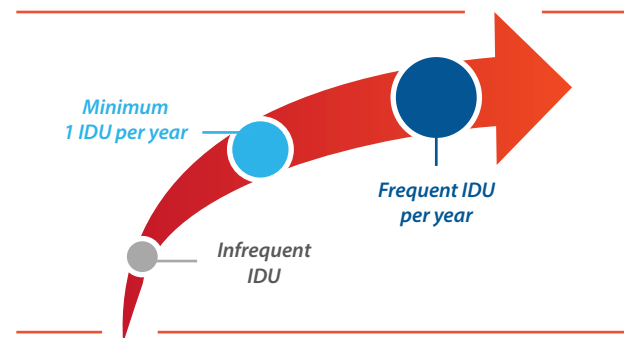
The International Baccalaureate (IB) Middle Years Programme (MYP) curriculum requires IB World Schools to engage students in at least one collaboratively planned interdisciplinary unit (IDU) per MYP year. IDUs weave together the content of two different subject courses in a manner that integrates the disciplinary knowledge in new and creative ways. At the same time, to engage students in this IDU—and to facilitate broader interdisciplinary learning—teachers are also required to collaboratively plan and reflect, to facilitate interdisciplinary learning to strengthen cross-curricular skills and the deepening of disciplinary learning.

This report summarizes the findings from the research study by the Claremont Evaluation Centre (CEC) on implementation of interdisciplinary learning as part of the collaborative strategies.

What does MYP interdisciplinary learning implementation look like across the world?
findings from teacher surveys (2017, 2018)

- Almost all (97%) teachers indicate that students participate in at least one interdisciplinary planning unit and three quarters of teachers indicated that students had at least one IDU each year.
- Teachers are more likely to implement practices that take fairly minimal integration (e.g. when I teach, I reference material being taught in other classes) over practices that require greater amount of integration (e.g. my class assignments require students to combine content they have learned in multiple classes.)
- Although teachers generally indicate they believe interdisciplinary units enhances student learning, they often struggle to implement it in the classroom.

Implementation practices
findings from 2018 schools visits (27 schools)



Factors that allow for progression in the implementation of IDU are:

- 1) Interdisciplinary units that are infrequently implemented
- 2) Schools implement one interdisciplinary unit per year
- 3) Frequent implementation of IDU beyond the minimum requirement per year



In the **first category** units at these sites were the product of individual teachers' "organic planning" efforts and therefore occurred whenever students happened to be enrolled in those teachers' classes. Further, given the general absence of ongoing planning activities at these sites, interdisciplinary units were repeated across teachers and years. Consistent with survey findings that suggest duration of MYP implementation was positively related to the quality of IDU implementation, teachers at these case study schools suggested these issues occurred because the school had not been implementing MYP: Next chapter long enough to address them.

In the **second category** we find schools that either connected learning through topics (i.e. explored a similar topic across both disciplines) or intentionally connected learning through assignments/single project. According to observations and student accounts, the most common IDU subject pairings at these sites were individuals and societies and language and literature. Teachers at these sites also noted that they tried to draw students' attentions to other subjects when they could, but that this was not always planned.

In individuals and societies, grade 6, no grade 7, their final unit was an interdisciplinary unit on responsible tourism. The I&S side of that was looking at tourism and the impacts that tourism has on the environment and on open communities - and the English side of that, they were looking at persuasive writing, so they had to identify a particular tourist destination, somewhere within [our country], identify negative impacts of tourism and propose a solution to that and then get in direct communication with that organization to say, this is what we have researched through our individuals and societies unit. – MYP student



Students at these sites readily recalled the term 'interdisciplinary unit'; students also felt IDUs helped increase their understanding of class content.

In the **third category** IDUs in this group of sites occurred more frequently than once a year per grade. Some teachers noted that they implement, not only the one required IDU per year, but become "inspired" and implement additional IDUs that are not required. Students at these sites also noted that their teachers tended to discuss what students were learning in other classes and how it connected to their current unit more frequently and more explicitly.

I think it's been so far very organic, you know, people get together and they come up with stuff, I mean there is some directive, like every year... it started with every department has to create one with another department and then after that it was like, well, you've done one, can you add another one and so it's been done through the departments themselves. You know, people get excited, I mean I've also twice this year come up with ideas that we could easily turn in to an IDU – MYP Teacher



In addition to vertical planning practices, we observed several teachers who drew students' attention to vertical articulation in the classroom. In these instances, teachers would verbally prompt students to remember previous skills or lessons they had developed or engaged in and how those could be leveraged to help them complete current projects. For instance, one English teacher highlighted the similarities between a character in a book the kids were currently reading and a character from a book they read in the previous unit to help them understand the character's perspective.



SUPPORT

to the implementation of Interdisciplinary learning



Exclusive time allocated to interdisciplinary planning. A lack of time was also the most frequently reported barrier to more integrated interdisciplinary units.



Interdisciplinary planning was prioritized when school leadership required (i.e. accountability) that teachers develop **“at least one” interdisciplinary unit** either per semester or per year.



Specific **professional development opportunities** related to interdisciplinary planning.

The presence of specific **interdisciplinary coordinators**.



Teacher buy-in was extremely important in instances where there were no accountability mechanism or formal time allotted for interdisciplinary planning.

BARRIERS

to the implementation of Interdisciplinary learning



Lack of time in class or in teachers' calendars to cover all of the lesson content.

Often times, instances where teachers would conceptually be able to link / match up content areas in order to plan IDUs, they were unable to due to **non-concurrent class schedules**.

Limited teacher understanding which was attributed to limited training or experiences with interdisciplinary planning. Teachers admitted that they struggled with understanding exactly what is expected of their IDUs as well as struggling with understanding how to embed the approaches to learning, key concepts, global contexts, and lines of inquiry into the same unit.



Summary

- Consistent across both survey and site visit findings, the majority of schools met the IB requirement of conducting at least one interdisciplinary unit per grade, per year.
- Despite site visit findings that the majority of classes involved in IDUs were connected via interdependent activities and projects, this pattern was not as robust in survey findings, where between-class integration appeared to be fairly minimal, approximately one third of teachers struggled to collaborate with other teachers on interdisciplinary planning.
- Although multiple overlapping supports and barriers to interdisciplinary planning and units were noted, teacher understanding continues to be a notable barrier.

Provocations

In your school context, how can you ensure that teachers collaborate to specifically plan and develop interdisciplinary units?

What strategies can you use to design professional development opportunities focused on interdisciplinary learning?

Beyond meeting the requirement, how can your school use the set of Interdisciplinary units to grow school culture?

How can your school prioritize key elements of the MYP such as ID learning and service as action to create a more holistic learning experience?



Background

In mid-2015, the IB commissioned the Claremont Evaluation Center (CEC) to lead a multi-year research project on the MYP: Next chapter's implementation and impact. The CEC study provides a wealth of data about what the implementation of the MYP curriculum looks like around the world in critical curriculum components.

Based on this multi-year research, the IB has identified three themes that categorize nine high-quality implementation strategies for the MYP:

- Collaborative strategies
- Key strategies
- Optional strategies

The IB will disseminate the CEC research findings in form of reports for high-quality implementation strategies and many other resources to support schools in further implementing the MYP programme.