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Christian Timo Zenke and Benedict Kurz

Laboratory schools: A new approach towards participatory research and democratic education in Europe

1 Introduction

Systematic cooperations between universities and schools have seen a veritable boom all over Europe in the last ten years. Newly founded schools in Brno, Cambridge, and Paris as well as in Cologne and Dresden have contributed to this new policy trend in education (see Heinrich & Klewin, 2020; Zenke, 2020). However, these continuous cooperations between universities and schools can by no means be considered a new phenomenon. On the contrary, since John Dewey founded the Laboratory School at the University of Chicago in 1896, the idea of a “university-run or affiliated school” (Cucchiara, 2010, p. 96) has become an essential part of, in particular, the North American school and university landscape.

Within this historically broad field of university schools, Dewey’s idea for a laboratory school holds a unique position. Based on the conceptualisation of his Chicago school as an “experimental station” (Dewey, 1896/1972, p. 244) for the Faculty of Education, laboratory schools include a focus on “research, innovation and bridging theory and practice” (Cucchiara, 2010, p. 97). In doing so, lab schools (being the common abbreviation) differ from other forms of university schools which centre their work almost exclusively around teacher training (Zenke & Kurz, 2021). Despite oftentimes being declared the “unique function” of lab schools, the focus on “research and experimentation” (van Til, 1969, p. 10) can neither be considered the only nor – as history highlights – the most important function of lab schools (see also Blazer, 2008; Jozwiak & Vera, 2016). This becomes apparent in the five core characteristics of laboratory schools outlined by the International Association of Laboratory Schools (IALS): *Research, Educational Experimentation, Curriculum Development, Professional Development and Teacher Training* (Dillon & Pinedo-Burns 2017, p. 15).

Curriculum Development	The school designs and publishes its own curriculum for teaching and learning.
Educational Experimentation	The school has a solid background allowing teachers to carry out innovative projects.
Professional Development	The school has a solid institutional plan regarding professional development for teachers and staff.
Research	The school conducts or collaborates in research that upholds a lab school's important role in education.
Teacher Training	The school solidly provides mentorship and assists student teachers during their field experience.

Fig. 1: Core characteristics of laboratory schools as listed by the International Association of Laboratory Schools (IALS) (Dillon & Pinedo-Burns, 2017, p. 15)

Despite these varied fields of activity, we argue that there are certain key research principles in the “applied legacy of [...] John Dewey” (Carnahan & Doyle 2012, p. 2) which have shaped the work of present-day lab schools – and continue to do so.

2 Key research principles of laboratory schools

In light of the diverse lab school landscape around the world, it is hardly possible to formulate criteria which are able to grasp all of these schools and their work. Nevertheless, based on recent literature on the research activities of laboratory schools and drawing on the experience from the *LabSchoolsEurope* project, we have outlined four research principles, which seem to guide the work of a large portion of today's lab schools (Zenke & Kurz 2021). These research principles are *transdisciplinarity*, *collaboration*, *experimentation*, and *transformativity* (see figure 2). This means that lab schools share the aspiration to further the systematic *transformation* of their national school environments by means of *transdisciplinary* research that is based on the *collaboration* between educators and researchers and that, at the same time, operates in an *experimenting* way.

(1) Transdisciplinarity: Laboratory schools “can be a powerful place for the uniting of disciplines” (Carnahan & Doyle, 2012, p. 10). They connect students, teachers, parents, researchers, community partners, and local alumni in a “grand collaborative partnership” (Carnahan & Doyle, 2012, p. 10). In doing so, lab schools encourage a fruitful exchange between a variety of professions (see Blazer, 2008; Jozwiak & Vera, 2016; Carver et al., 2017). This transcending of boundaries, in particular between school practice and academia, constitutes the first key research principle. Therefore, the everyday research and development work of lab schools can be understood as a type of *transdisciplinary* research. This means it

is oriented toward synthesis, thus including not only researchers from different scientific disciplines but also additionally practice actors and agents (see Defila & Di Giulio, 2018, p. 10).

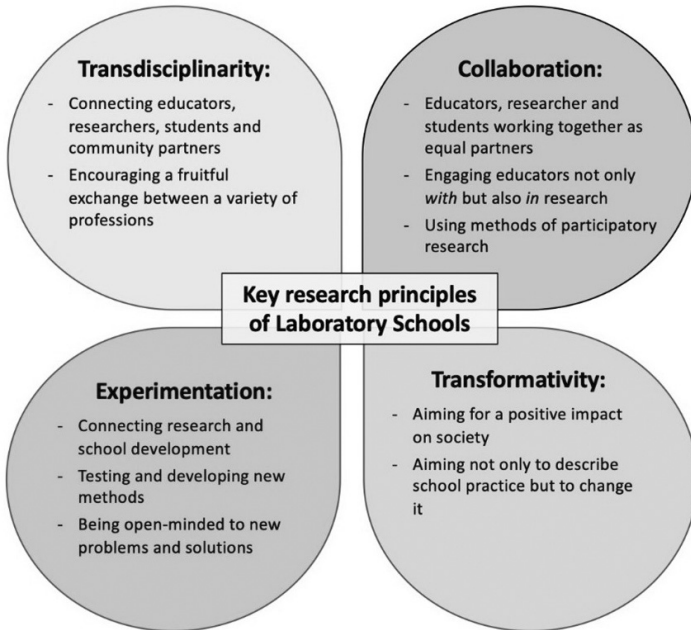


Fig. 2: Key research principles of laboratory schools

(2) Collaboration: Just as it is the case for other forms of transdisciplinary research outside the educational realm, it is crucial that stakeholders like teachers, teaching assistants and social pedagogues are substantially involved in research and development endeavours (Defila & Di Giulio, 2018, p. 10). As “true partners in the investigation” (Carver et al., 2017, p. 294), educators not only engage *with* but also *in* research (see Cordingley, 2015). According to Sharon M. Carver et al. (2017), lab schools “that take Dewey’s mission seriously” (p. 280) therefore cultivate “the dispositions necessary for effective research collaborations among all of the learners in the school and are proactive in seeking partnership opportunities” (pp. 280-281). These research collaborations, in particular between teachers and researchers, can take diverse forms (see figure 3). What Elizabeth Schlesinger-Devlin, James Elicker and Treshawn Anderson (2017) refer to as “true collaborative research” (p. 40), however, usually plays a central role. They describe it as a form of research “in which faculty and lab school teachers work together as equal partners to develop the goals, objectives, and approach of a research project that

is mutually beneficial for all members of the research group” (Schlesinger-Devlin et al., 2017, p. 40).

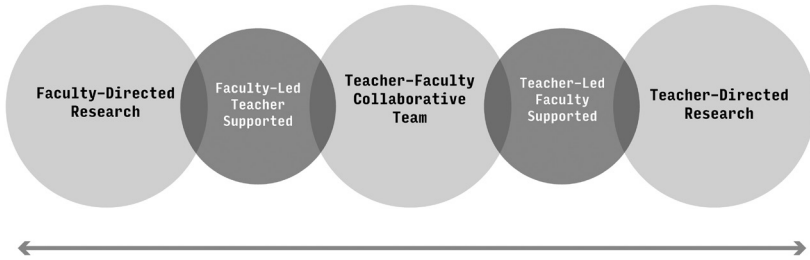


Fig. 3: Continuum of collaborative relationships between lab school teachers and faculty researchers (Schlesinger-Devlin et al., 2017, p. 40)

(3) Experimentation: Various forms of research and development have traditionally found their place at laboratory schools, including quantitative longitudinal studies (see Gold & Zentarra, 2020), intrinsic case studies (see Jamison & Kirowa, 2016), and ethnographic field research (see Freke, 2020), as well as more teacher-directed research focussing “on developing innovative experiences and activities or lessons for the children in the classroom” (Schlesinger-Devlin et al., 2017, p. 51). In this context, another key research principle of lab schools emerges: the focus on experimental research and development (van Til, 1969; Blazer, 2008; Cucchiara, 2010). This is based on John Dewey’s (1896/1972) vision of his Chicago laboratory school as an “experimental station for the testing and developing of methods which, when elaborated, may be safely and strongly recommended to other schools” (p. 244). This implies a focus on processes rather than on measuring outcomes, which is why lab schools tend to favour searching, trying, and being open-minded to new problems and solutions (Hentig, 1988, p. 3). Therefore, the practice of experimentation anticipates the “disorderly”, ‘messy’ features of the research process” (Fine & Deegan, 1996, p. 5) in order to learn how to better deal with the unpredictability and complexity of everyday school practice.

(4) Transformativity: Laboratory schools aim to positively impact society. Not only do they want to describe, analyse and understand their own school practice, they also intend to contribute to the *transformation* of school practice at large as “vehicles for education reform initiatives” (Cucchiara, 2010, p. 100), as “essential voices in affecting the future of education” (Jozwiak & Vera 2016, p. 19) or as “incubators for applied research that fosters new ideas, new knowledge, and new professional practices” (Schlesinger-Devlin et al., 2017, p. 41). In line with their ambition to be a driving force for change, lab schools aim to inspire other schools by sharing their practices. One example for this is the dissemination of

specific approaches regarding the democratic education of students – similarly to what the authors of this book are doing via their project website¹. Therefore, the research and development work of lab schools can be considered a form of *transformative* research. This means, on the one hand, analysing societal developments and offering knowledge accordingly, while on the other hand, aiming at societal transformation (Defila & Di Giulio, 2018, p. 11). It is by no means accidental that this aspiration towards fostering social change coincides with the key research principles of *transdisciplinarity* and *collaboration*.

3 Laboratory schools in Europe

While laboratory schools have a long tradition in North America (see Cucchiara, 2010; Jozwiak & Vera 2016), a different situation emerges when looking at Europe. Many European countries display distinct national traditions with regard to university schools. There are the *normaalikoulu* (Teacher Training Schools) in Finland (see Hofman & Niemi, 2016), the *Praxisschulen* (Practical Schools) in Austria (see Krainz-Dürr, 2019) and the *University Training Schools* in the UK (see DfE, 2015). All of these types of university schools may vary according to their national context as well as the task given to them by their national authorities. Traditionally, however, and despite national variations, they all tended to focus on teacher training rather than on school research. This situation has begun to change in recent years. Not only are numerous new university schools being founded, but there are also diverse initiatives throughout Europe aiming to establish a lab school which follows the principles outlined above (see Zenke & Kurz, 2021). Within this expanding field of European lab schools, several schools and universities have decided to foster a collaboration across borders. Therefore, they initiated the Erasmus+ project *LabSchoolsEurope: Participatory Research for Democratic Education* in 2019. The project partners include schools and universities from five European cities:

Bielefeld (Germany): *Laborschule Bielefeld* is probably the oldest lab school in Europe. *Laborschule*, which literally translates as Laboratory School, and *Oberstufen-Kolleg*, an upper secondary school, were founded as university schools in 1974 next to Bielefeld University. *Laborschule Bielefeld* is a progressive state school currently teaching 710 students from year 0 (the pre-school year) to year 10 (end of lower secondary school). The school is accompanied by the Laboratory School Research Unit, which is part of Bielefeld University's Faculty of Education. Educators from *Laborschule* and researchers from the Research Unit closely cooperate in research and development projects on various topics (such as inclusion or democratic education).

1 <https://www.labschoolseurope.eu/democratic-practices/>

Brno (Czech Republic): *Labyrinth Laboratory School Brno* is the first laboratory primary (ages 6 to 11) and lower-secondary (ages 11 to 15) school in the Czech Republic. The school operates on a private basis and was accredited by the Czech Ministry of Education before being established in 2016. Currently, there are 220 students cared for by a team of 49 people, including teachers, teaching assistants, school assistants, psychologists, and project managers. The total capacity of the school will be 360 students as well as 160 students for the 4-year grammar school. Since its founding, the Labyrinth laboratory school has cooperated with the Faculty of Education of Masaryk University in Brno. It offers short- and long-term teaching practice to university students and to Erasmus students. Labyrinth is also involved in lifelong education offering workshops, lectures, and art exhibitions to encourage learning among all age groups.

Cambridge (United Kingdom): The *University of Cambridge Primary School* (UCPS) opened in September 2015 and is a three-forms of entry primary school educating over 600 children. As a University Training School it has three key features: the first is to be a primary school, inclusive, ambitious for all and innovative in practice. The second is to work with the Faculty of Education of the University of Cambridge and others, in Initial Teacher Education. It supports new teachers into the profession through placements. The third, is to be research-informed and research-generating. Even in its early stages, the UCPS has developed high quality professional development courses, rooted in academic research, inspired by bringing theory, research and practice together.

Paris (France): *Lab School Paris* is part of a wider network founded in 2015. This community, the French “Lab School Network”, is made up of social actors from different backgrounds (teachers, researchers, parents, association members, etc.). Its main goal is to promote the use of research for educational success by strengthening the links between research and teaching practices. Managed by a non-profit association, the Lab School Network seeks to contribute to the educational transition in various ways: collaborative research, training and school creation. Lab School Paris – as the first school of this network – was established at the beginning of the 2017-2018 school year with a team of two teachers and a multi-grade class from grades 3 to 5 (called CE2 to CM2 in French, 8 to 11 years old). Its mission is to be an innovative, multi-level, bilingual (French-English), solidary, secular and eco-responsible school. With these values, its aim is to support children both in the acquisition process of the French common core of knowledge, skills and culture (*socle commun de connaissances, de compétences et de culture*), and in their overall social and emotional development, enabling them to become responsible, enlightened, autonomous, supportive and blooming citizens. Its goal also is to welcome children from diverse backgrounds in order to build a real social mix, by proposing a system of scholarships according to a fee scale indexed to family

income. Another goal is to create an inclusive school, integrating some children with special educational needs.

Vienna (Austria): The *Praxisschulen* (Practical Schools) of the *University College of Teacher Education Vienna* enable the linking of theory and practice possible. *Praxisvolksschule Vienna* is a primary school for pre-service classroom teaching. It is a school for 6 to 10-year-old students with around 200 students and 24 teachers. *Praxismittelschule Vienna* is a lower secondary school for pre-service classroom teaching. At *Praxismittelschule*, 35 teachers work with 200 students between the ages of 10 and 14. A central concern of both schools is their work in the area of school development, such as the development of new as well as the advancement of existing pedagogical and didactic models and their evaluation. In addition, both *Praxisschulen* offer university students and university lecturers of the *University College of Teacher Education Vienna* an ideal field for participatory research projects. The *University College of Teacher Education Vienna* is Austria's largest institution for educating teachers and for the professional development of future and current pedagogues. At present, it offers Bachelor of Education programs for compulsory education and vocational education, as well as university courses for other pedagogical professions, such as recreational education and elementary education.

4 Democratic Education

The laboratory schools participating in the Erasmus+ project *LabsSchoolsEurope: Participatory Research for Democratic Education* not only strive to be laboratory schools that embody the principles pointed out above, they also focus on issues of *democratic education*. In this context, they share a view of *democratic education* as being oriented towards “compassionate citizenship” (Higham & Biddulph, 2018, p. 388). Drawing on Edda Sant's (2019) conceptualisation of democratic education as learning for, within and through democracy, the schools of the *LabSchoolsEurope* project focus primarily on the latter. This implies, that decision-making processes are based on “a democratic ethos involving the members of the community” (Sant, 2019, p. 682). Therefore, “students have the opportunity to learn as part of a community in which they have a voice and can participate in making decisions with one another, leading to an authentic understanding of multiple perspectives” (Allen, 2011, p. 3).

At the moment, the democratic education of students is faced with a multitude of challenges. For one, there is a need to react to the rise of anti-democratic movements all over Europe. In addition, pedagogical developments towards more individualised learning in the classroom as well as digitalisation pose a challenge to the self-conception of many schools as places of togetherness – especially in times

of lockdowns and distance learning during the COVID-19 pandemic. Hence, the question arises as to how schools can avoid losing sight of the difficult balance between individual and collaborative learning while at the same time being spaces for togetherness, where different generations, cultures, and backgrounds form a starting point for learning and living democracy.

5 LabSchoolsEurope: collaborating across borders

Considering the commonalities in both research and pedagogics, the project partners from Bielefeld, Brno, Cambridge, Paris, and Vienna initiated the project *LabSchoolsEurope: Participatory Research for Democratic Education* in 2019. This project, funded by the European Union (under the Erasmus+ grant scheme), comprises six main objectives:

- a) to document and transnationally compare different research approaches and local conditions as well as to identify principles of participatory research at the project partners' institutions;
- b) to develop and disseminate practice guides, teaching materials and good-practice examples for dealing with heterogeneity at primary level through the lens of democratic education;
- c) to further professionalise educators and researchers involved in the project in regards to research methodology, schooling and teaching;
- d) to foster the long-term improvement of the schooling and teaching practices at the project members' institutions with regard to democratic education;
- e) to further strengthen and consolidate the cooperation between schools and universities at each project location;
- f) to initiate a European Lab School Network which facilitates the exchange among laboratory schools but also serves as a starting point for supporting the founding of future lab schools.

While the practice guides, teaching materials and good-practice examples that were developed in the context of the project can be downloaded via the project website², the aim of this book is manifold. While in this chapter, we outlined the work of the LabSchoolsEurope project and, more specifically, presented the key research principles of laboratory schools, the following chapters will paint a vivid picture of the European lab school landscape. The authors, educators and researchers from Austria, the Czech Republic, England, France, and Germany, will present their laboratory schools in detail and grant insights into how they bring the lab school framework to life according to local contexts, needs, and preferences. By elaborating on their different approaches to engaging in/with research and allowing students to learn for, with, and through democracy they illuminate both themes of

2 <https://www.labschoolseurope.eu>

the *LabSchoolsEurope* project. Due to their specific school concepts and missions, each chapter also highlights an important aspect of laboratory schools.

At first, Kirsten Beadle, Jan Wilhelm Dieckmann, Christine Drah, Nicole Freke, Cornelia Hofmann, Benedict Kurz, Annette Textor, and Christian Timo Zenke introduce the reader to *Laborschule Bielefeld*. They present Laborschule's unique teacher-researcher approach, which allows for truly participatory research projects that are based on actual classroom issues, but also helps to gain insights that are relevant for other schools and policy-makers. In line with Laborschule's tradition of not only constantly reforming itself, but attempting to reform the German education landscape as well, the authors also present the school's pedagogical concept and share how democratic education is lived and practised in everyday school life.

Next, Pascale Haag and Marlène Martin show how *Lab School Paris* thoughtfully includes a research perspective to further develop their expanding school. Their chapter also highlights how contextual factors, such as norms and traditions of national education systems, shape the local enactment of the lab school framework. After a general presentation of the university school context in France, they present the history of the foundation of Lab School Paris, the main theoretical principles upon which their pedagogical approach is grounded, and the wider network of research that aims at contributing to strengthen the links between educational research and classroom practices.

In their chapter, Jana Chocholatá, Monika Mandelíčková, Gabriela Oaklandová, and Břetislav Svozil outline the work of *Labyrinth Laboratory School Brno*. They show how they adapted the lab school framework in order to bring new ideas into the Czech education system. Focussing on social responsibility, they carefully relate Labyrinth's pedagogical concept to popular educational theories and share how they attempt to foster democratic experiences and skills in Labyrinth's students. By bringing together authors from the school as well as from Masaryk University, this chapter is also a testimony of how beneficial the collaboration between educators and researchers can be.

The *University of Cambridge Primary School* (UCPS) was designed to become the heart of a new city quarter in Cambridge, Eddington. In their chapter, James Biddulph, Luke Rolls, Aimee Durning, Elena Natale, and Ellen Millar share the remarkable story of their school's foundation. Their sound theoretical approach illustrates how educational research can inform curriculum design and school practice. Together with a pedagogy that, first and foremost has the child in mind, UCPS aims to educate children for a world that cannot be imagined yet. By sharing their imagination of a new democratic education in and outside of the classroom, they grant fascinating insights. On a side note, this chapter also allows the reader to gain a better understanding of the UK's fragmented school system.

Finally, Gabriele Kulhanek-Wehlend, Stephanie Wagner, Harald Knecht, Oliver Wagner, and Adrian Schnitzler present the *Praxissschulen of the University College of Teacher Education Vienna*. They focus on an important area of activity for many lab schools around the world, namely teacher education. In addition, they provide vivid insights into how they intend to teach and learn democracy with their students who come from diverse backgrounds. Like all of Austria's Praxissschulen, Praxisvolksschule Vienna and Praxismittelschule Vienna were once created to improve teacher education. Recently, however, the Austrian Government has shifted their goal to develop a stronger research profile – which, fortunately, Vienna's Praxissschulen are perfectly qualified for. Therefore, this chapter also provides helpful insights into the challenges schools face in the context of changing policy paradigms.

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