

**Impuls Laborschule**



**Benedict Kurz  
Christian Timo Zenke  
(Eds.)**

# **LabSchoolsEurope**

**Participatory Research for Democratic Education**

# Impuls Laborschule

## Band 12

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# LabSchoolsEurope

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*Elizabeth Morley*

## Foreword

Welcome to *LabSchoolsEurope: Participatory Research for Democratic Education*, a much-anticipated book that ably captures the experiences and findings of a new network of schools that heralds the unique contexts of lab schools across Europe. In its relatively short years as a gathering of university-affiliated schools, LabSchoolsEurope has accomplished a remarkable feat of collaboration. This book tells in warmly drawn, detailed and immensely readable accounts, the story of each founding school and its purpose, pedagogies, and focused research findings. The messages are hopeful – not only because the schools involved are strong exemplars of commitment to educational excellence for their own students – but also because, with a compelling mix of humility and urgency, they take up the possibility and mission of improving schools for all students by exploring how lab schools can contribute to societal good.

It is an honour for the International Association of Laboratory Schools (IALS) to recognize the work of LabSchoolsEurope and the benchmark that this volume represents for all lab schools. First, it is an example of shared work among university-based researchers and school-based educators to explore education's best practices. Second, this book delves deeply into foundational principles of democratic education in ways that will have impact on other schools. And third, this content and these authentic voices create possibilities for meaningful conversations among educators now and in the future.

The verve and focus of the LabSchoolsEurope project, which was funded by the European Commission, have already been unusually invigorating and inviting to other university-based schools across the globe. This volume, representing a multi-year exploration of democratic education in lab schools, is the capstone of a shared project but also a gateway into the next steps for LabSchoolsEurope through its expanding connections with schools, teachers, administrators, researchers, and professors. In *LabSchoolsEurope: Participatory Research for Democratic Education* we are offered a glimpse of what it means to be a learning lab and how making research outcomes visible in classrooms within one school can influence others well beyond its walls. As a new network, LabSchoolsEurope has created a needed opportunity to listen to and learn from each other, making the job of lab schools less lonely and more collegial, less uncertain in the hard times

and more celebratory and surer in the best of times. We know from experience that connections matter.

As the International Association of Laboratory Schools has found across its 65-year history, we are stronger and more likely to have impact when we gather, build friendships, hear each other's stories, and share experiences. This book welcomes readers from newer schools, celebrates the originals, and brings voice to the realities, obstacles, and joys of the complex schools that lab school educators come from. Each chapter includes an origin story so that we can better understand the foundations and beliefs that gave each school its life and purpose. As one reads these, it is reassuring to hear where and how others are meeting expectations of their universities. Knowing that we are not alone has value.

When we consider the origins of lab schools, we are entering under an expansive umbrella, and it makes sense that no two schools within that circle are alike. Current contexts are different, just as origins are, and there is meaning to be found in noting both similarities and differences. How we begin can make a critical difference in how we prioritize what we do. For example, in North America as in Europe, some lab schools began as what we then called Normal Schools, which had the explicit mission of providing teacher training. Teacher education may remain the primary focus for the universities that now support these schools. On the other hand, some lab schools grew in the lab model of science departments in universities, reasoning that if the sciences like medicine, chemistry and physics need labs, then surely education would benefit from having learning labs also.

Beginning in the late 19th century and the first half of the 20th, many lab schools sprouted from the emerging fields of psychology and sociology. Taking advantage of new knowledge about both child development and the impact of social realities like poverty or malnutrition on a child's capacity to learn, several universities started lab schools to explore what schools could look like if they were to effectively meet the needs of each child as an individual instead of a one-size fits all approach familiar in the earliest schooling models.

Meanwhile on the other side of the globe, university-affiliated schools abound in Asia, where many higher education faculties have at least one, and sometimes five or six, fully affiliated schools from pre-school to high school bearing the university's name. In China, Korea, Taiwan, Japan, Viet Nam, India and more, one can see large, often very modern school buildings on university campuses, engaged in meeting their institutional mandates. This might be research or teacher education, among the most traditional lab school missions, or they might serve other purposes including recruitment and retention of faculty, large scale community daycare, or the initiation and piloting of new public policy in education or health care. Origin stories help us to see why a school exists and whose needs and what missions it must meet to stay viable.

*LabSchoolsEurope: Participatory Research for Democratic Education* honours the multiple origins of its schools and provides clarity that there are many ways to be a lab school by acknowledging in its introduction the five long-standing tenets of lab school practice – teacher education, curriculum development, research, professional development, and educational experimentation. Lab school leaders all know their institution’s fundamental *raison d’être* – what makes them a lab school and not just another good school – but sometimes the daily business of running of a school can blur or obscure how we can and must add value for our universities and communities. Contributions to all five missions are not necessary to be a lab school, of course, but together, our networks work across all of them. Thanks are due to the authors of each chapter for elucidating a range of ways to contribute, ideally becoming an indispensable asset to educational betterment for all in the process.

It is rare to have such a candid and helpful look at the founding years of new lab schools as is offered in several places in this book, and there are lessons to learn from each. Detailing how a new school comes to life highlights complexities that are unique to university-affiliated schools. It is appropriate to acknowledge here that most lab schools have natural friends and natural enemies and that we are fewer not more in number than we once were. At times, there can be uncomfortably close enemies. Professors who prefer their student teachers to be in schools that seem to be more regular; researchers who don’t have time to grow research relationships with lab school teachers before arriving in classrooms to collect data; a suspicion that the lab schools are *passé* or elite, or old school or new school, or inaccessible. These can build walls. But there are many friends: hundreds of global visitors; researchers who acknowledge lab schools’ unique research capability; the university president who proudly cuts the ribbon on a new lab school building; parents who want their family to be part of growing a better public school system; teachers who find “their people” in lab schools; and students who grow up to say, “The lab school gave me everything”. These are natural friends. Hearing of closures or failure to launch hurts us all. But reports of new lab schools in the recent past in, for example, Britain, France, Czech Republic, Iraq, Canada, Uganda, Japan, and the United States affirm that the movement is alive and well. *LabSchoolsEurope* brings us true stories of successes and obstacles, in a compelling, genuine voice.

In September 2022, the *LabSchoolsEurope* project partners invited lab educators to Bielefeld, Germany for a highly successful conference that set the stage for next steps together. Titled “Researching Schools: Bridging Research and Practice at Laboratory and University Schools”, this meeting affirmed both the tremendous promise *LabSchoolsEurope* holds and its robust effectiveness in communicating, connecting, and advancing lab school research. Research in lab schools, a long-standing and vital heartbeat of what many university schools do, makes a unique



and almost immeasurable difference to the landscape of education for all. Some years ago, the International Association of Laboratory Schools surveyed a group of lab school people, asking them to answer the question: “What would you like to discuss with lab schools around the world?” The resounding answer was “Research”. This makes sense as educational research holds such tremendous potential for contribution, yet it also requires tremendous commitment within schools to capacity-building, relationship-making, and developing understanding between teachers and researchers. The conference in Bielefeld afforded a grounded, face-to-face opportunity to consider research and practice and the ways to close the not infrequent gap between them.

Looking back into historical roots of lab school research, we almost immediately find the University of Chicago Laboratory School, noted in the introduction to this book, where John Dewey, an American philosopher and educational pioneer, founded in 1896, what many credit with paving the path for research for those who followed. The school Dewey founded championed progressive principles and a clear pedagogy – it was also founded on frustration. It makes me wonder, how much of the lab school movement and its research owes its existence to various frustrations with the way things were or are. John Dewey was deeply disenchanted with the way schools seemed to overlook what was known already in the late 19th century about child development. Dewey’s beliefs were progressive and included the broad principle that schools are the foundation of society, that educators are charged with preparing their students for responsible citizenship, and that the curriculum should be hands-on, minds-on, hearts-on. For Dewey, schools absolutely had to move away from the teacher transmitting knowledge by figuratively opening the top of a student’s head and pouring in facts. His school created meaningful reasons for deeper thinking and encouraged questions. The school aimed to graduate students who could build community, listen, and contribute. Importantly, Dewey saw the lab school as one large-scale research artifact. Would it work? What were the features that made a difference? Were parents on board? And the children – how did they respond? The school stood as an example of inquiry-based and student-centred learning, something we have seen become widely better understood by educators and parents, and firmly grounded in evidence.

The reach of Dewey’s ideas into policy, practice, and research continues to shape education today, but his gift to lab schools is a treasured inheritance. Many lab schools have inherited permission and encouragement to see the whole school experience through a research lens. As an origin story, frustration on behalf of children is something that many educators can relate to right now through the everyday realities of life in today’s schools. While the thinking of Dewey or any of the founders of lab schools has influenced our way of doing school, the job is not yet done. We are frustrated when things are not the best they can be for students and their learning. When we know that research findings sometimes take too long

to influence practice, or we feel that researchers are not asking the right questions to find the answers we need, we are deeply connected to our origins.

This book reminds us that those in lab schools are often in the privileged position to take action, to dig deeper, to encourage new ideas, and to disseminate knowledge. LabSchoolsEurope is hard at work doing exactly that. By pushing the boundaries regarding participatory school research and democratic education, they shine a light for the lab school community around the world.

*Elizabeth Morley* is the Chair of the International Committee of the International Association of Laboratory Schools (IALS). She is also Principal Emerita of the Dr. Eric Jackman Institute of Child Study Laboratory School at the University of Toronto, has served as IALS President, and as a visiting scholar at Kobe Shinwa University in Japan. E-Mail: [elizabeth.morley@utoronto.ca](mailto:elizabeth.morley@utoronto.ca)

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Across Europe, laboratory schools find new ways to tackle the educational issues of our time. Their work is guided by educational experimentation and the aim to strengthen the bond between educational practice and research. In this book, lab schools from Bielefeld, Brno, Cambridge, Paris, and Vienna provide unique insights into how they bring John Dewey's framework for a lab school to life. This book is the result of the Erasmus+ project „LabSchoolsEurope: Participatory Research for Democratic Education“. It is a testament to the potential of collaborating across borders.

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