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Laborschule Bielefeld: Doing teacher research in an embryonic society

1 Introduction

What first stands out to most visitors of Laborschule Bielefeld, is the iconic open-plan school building, designed to end the closed-door classes of the past (see figure 1). As the laboratory school with the longest tradition throughout Europe, Laborschule (which literally means *Laboratory School*) is well known across Germany. Founded in 1974 as a state-run progressive school, Laborschule has been assigned the task of developing new forms of teaching and learning as well as living together at school (MSB, 1992). Its pedagogical approach, which has informed reforms and school development processes across the state of North Rhine-Westphalia throughout the years, significantly differs from what one might call a typical German school. There are, for example, no grades but individual feedback reports; no subjects, but overarching areas of experience-based learning. Within the school community, all members – be it children or grown-ups – are supposed to have a voice. Therefore, Laborschule's admission policy aims at mirroring society at large, while its pedagogies aim at creating a democratic society in small.

Laborschule is one of two university schools in the city of Bielefeld – Oberstufen-Kolleg Bielefeld, an upper secondary school, being the other. The close ties to Bielefeld University emphasise the aspiration to bridge the gap between school practice and educational research, perfectly embodied by Laborschule's unique *teacher-researcher model*. This model enables every Laborschule educator to engage in research in collaboration with academics from Laborschule's Research Unit, which is based at Bielefeld University's Faculty of Educational Science. Together, educators and researchers collaborate in so-called research and development projects.

In this chapter, educators from Laborschule Bielefeld as well as researchers from its Research Unit present the school. For context, we begin with an introduction to the fairly complex German school system before tracing Laborschule's origins. Regarding Laborschule's manifold research activities, we first outline the structures

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and processes that have been developed over the last decades. In a second step, we draw on the research principles of laboratory schools outlined in the introduction to illustrate the school's research approach. To paint a vivid picture of the school, we will outline its pedagogical concept, introduce several elements of democratic education, and illustrate how this comes to life at the different key stages of Laborschule. We end by reflecting on current developments and challenges as well as by taking a look at the school's future.

Fig. 1: The open-plan school building of Laborschule Bielefeld. (Photo: D. Harder)

2 Germany's education system(s)

Today, the German education system is primarily shaped by its pluralistic institutions, particularly on the level of secondary education. It is generally the sixteen German federal states (the *Länder*) that individually are responsible for dealing with questions regarding the school system. This means that each federal state passes legislation and deals with the administration of its education system. As a result, all federal states differ, more or less considerably, in terms of their specific types of schools, the age at which children start primary school as well as the number of years children spend there, etc. Therefore, the majority of features introduced in this section refer to the education system of North-Rhine Westphalia, which is a federal state in the west part of Germany.

To introduce this fairly complex school system, we give an overview of its structural aspects while also outlining the different paths a child can follow through the

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German education system. Many children's paths start with them spending a part of their day at a day-care centre or, later on, at kindergarten. In most federal states, compulsory schooling starts when children turn six. They then follow a specific trajectory, beginning with primary school (covering years 1 to 4, in some states 1 to 6) before transitioning to a school at lower secondary level. At primary level, children first receive written feedback regarding their learning progress, before numerical marks for assessing performance are subsequently introduced in years 3 or 4. What is crucial to note is that, while at primary level the idea of children of all abilities and needs learning together is widely accepted and practised, learner groups from secondary level onwards oftentimes are differentiated based on their performance level.

In contrast to the comprehensive school systems of many European countries, Germany has a tiered school system (Wiborg, 2010, p. 539). Broadly speaking, one can differentiate between those secondary schools that offer one specific track to their students and those that include several different tracks. The former ones, including *Gymnasium*, *Realschule*, and *Hauptschule*, focus on admitting students with rather homogenous performance levels, "whereby track assignment is conditional on students' prior achievement" (Kruse, 2019, p. 120). In contrast to this, school types such as *Gesamtschule*, *Gemeinschaftsschule* or *Sekundarschule* welcome students with varying educational performances and needs, thus incorporating various tracks. Apart from this type of outer differentiation outlined above, many schools also use inner differentiation that groups students of similar performance levels and with different interests (e.g. "basic" and "advanced" courses). Generally, student performance is assessed via numerical marks (e.g. from 1, "very good", to 6, "insufficient", at lower secondary level). Based on the final report at the end of each year, a student who has failed one or several classes may need to repeat a year. Compulsory schooling ends after nine or ten years, depending on the legislation of each federal state. Upon graduating, students move into upper secondary education. It is necessary to differentiate between full-time general education schools, such as *Gymnasium* or *Gesamtschule*, and vocational schools, such as *Berufsschule*. This latter one is part of Germany's traditional dual job training scheme in which trainees work while also spending a certain amount of time at a vocational school to learn job-related skills.

Students graduating from full-time general education schools receive a particular school leaving certificate, the Abitur (roughly comparable to the A-levels), which enables them to enrol at a university. Finally, the tertiary education sector includes institutions of higher education (KMK, 2019, pp. 24-27).

Those who intend to become teachers must enrol at university. The Bachelor of Education is designed in such a way that students are trained in their two subjects (e.g. Biology and English) while also acquiring fundamental knowledge necessary for their role as future teachers. The consecutive Master of Education programme

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in North-Rhine Westphalia includes a semester that students spend at a specific school to make first experiences teaching their subjects. After graduating from university, future teachers undergo an approximately eighteen-months-long traineeship at a school that is accompanied by weekly seminars.

In the last twenty years, German policymaking was shaped by its infamous PISA shock of 2001. Similar to previous large-scale assessments, PISA 2000 highlighted two challenging features within German education. Not only did German students' results in all three areas measured rank below international averages, but these results also revealed the structural inequalities within the German school system. What became apparent is the link between students' performance levels and their socioeconomic status as well as their social background (e.g. as a child of migrant parents). In other words, PISA had once again rendered visible the segregating effects of the three-track system (Davoli & Entorf, 2018, pp. 2f). This lead to several governance reforms, such as the implementation of education standards, thus prompting a paradigm shift from input to output orientation (Helm & Keusch, 2019), as well as the re-development of specific institutes that monitor the quality of education in each federal state (Rürup, 2014).

Like for many other education systems around the world, the COVID-19 pandemic has been another shock, deeply affecting the German school system, its educators and, in particular, its students. What has become apparent are old and new challenges: How to overcome the reproduction of inequalities in German education? How can schools become and stay places of togetherness and for community-building in times of individualisation and polarization? How can students learn to become citizens that not only participate in but also are able to shape the democratic societies they live in?

3 Laborschule's founding history

The founding history of Laborschule Bielefeld is closely linked to the structure of the German education system as well as its evolution throughout history. While *Gymnasium* as the highest track enabled and still enables students to attend higher education afterwards, *Hauptschule* as the basic track traditionally prepared students for Germany's dual vocational training system. *Realschule* as the middle track allowed its students to pursue various future careers, including the job market as well as routes towards higher education.

Having been unable to abolish the three-tiered system comprising of *Gymnasium, Mittelschule/Realschule* and *Hauptschule* by the end of the 1940s, progressive forces made a second attempt at reforming the system in the second half of the 1960s. One central motif for the reform aspiration – apart from increasing the numbers of university graduates – was to enable students to have more equal opportunities

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within the German school system. As it became apparent that the track system contributed considerably to the reproduction of inequalities, reformers focused on introducing a new type of school: the comprehensive school (*Gesamtschule*). The goal was to create a school for all students attending until the end of year 10, hoping to eventually overcome the triad of Germany's tracked system.

Part of such progressive reform aspirations was also the foundation of new universities, e.g. the founding of Bielefeld University in North Rhine-Westphalia in the second half of the 1960s. Considering itself a *reform university*, Bielefeld University was part of a trend towards expanding higher education and thereby allowing new social classes of the German population to attend higher education. Bielefeld University dedicated itself to consciously dismantling the boundaries both between the different disciplines as well as between university and society. This focus also influenced the appointment of Hartmut von Hentig, a young professor for pedagogy at the University of Göttingen, as member of the founding committee of Bielefeld University. Born in 1925, Hentig had completed his doctorate in Chicago (USA). Since the early 1960s, he had publicly become known for his progressive views on pedagogy as well as advocating for a radical reform to establish a comprehensive school model in Germany. Hentig eventually convinced policymakers in the state of North Rhine-Westphalia to fund two long-term school projects, which were assigned to Bielefeld University: Laborschule Bielefeld and Oberstufen-Kolleg Bielefeld, an upper secondary school. Both schools were given the task to develop new pedagogical methods and curricula and, with regard to educational research, to function as a field for observing, experiencing and experimenting. By generating evidence-based knowledge about compulsory schooling, Laborschule and Oberstufen-Kolleg were intended to contribute to the body of research, thus helping to further promote and legitimise *Gesamtschule* as a new type of school, where all children can learn together.

Even though there had been several attempts at establishing a closer link between university and school in Germany during the 1920s, Hentig's design for Bielefeld University's experimental schools constituted a new approach in German education. Following an initial phase of four years of development, Laborschule's teachers and researchers would be given the time and space to not only develop new models for teaching but to also research these innovations, mainly through action research. In his works, Hentig repeatedly referred to John Dewey and his Laboratory School, which was founded in 1894 in Chicago, as a conceptual point of reference and key argument for education policymaking. This way, not only did Hentig adopt Dewey's term "Laboratory School" for his own experimental school (*Laborschule* literally means laboratory school in German), he also incorporated numerous pedagogical and research principles that had been devised by Dewey. This included the focus on the idea of experience, the concept of school as an

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embryonic society as well as the close collaboration between academic research and school practice (Zenke, 2020).
To this day, Laborschule holds a singular position within the German education system. In recent years, however, the idea of the "university-run or affiliated school" (Cucchiara, 2010, p. 96) has been gaining traction in Germany. Today, we see a diverse and growing university school landscape in Germany (e.g. in Dresden, Essen, Cologne or Koblenz/Landau). Even though they usually do not operate under the term *laboratory school*, they all vigorously endeavour to establish a closer link between university and school practice (see also Reich, Asselhoven & Kargl, 2015; Reich, 2019; Heinrich & van Ackeren, 2019; Kauertz et al., 2019). What makes Laborschule stand out from these recently founded schools – apart from its age – is its elaborate teacher-researcher model which was optimised over many years.

4 Research with and by educators – Laborschule's unique research approach

Since its beginnings, the basic idea of Laborschule's research activities was to bridge the gap between disciplines, including school practice and educational research, as well as professions, such as teachers and researchers. Having been modified various times over the years, Laborschule's research approach still functions as the basis for its everyday work at the intersection of academia and school practice. Laborschule's *teacher-researcher model* ensures that educators are a central part of the research process. To guide the research and development work at Laborschule, certain structures and processes have been developed, tested, implemented, and adjusted over the last 50 years (Textor et al., 2020). After presenting these structures and processes in the following section, we draw on the key research principles, which have already been outlined in the introduction to this volume, to dive deeper into Laborschule's research approach.

4.1 Structuring Laborschule's research and development work

The close cooperation and interdependence of Laborschule and its Research Unit, which is based at Bielefeld University's Faculty of Educational Science, is illustrated by the joint management board. All important decisions regarding both institutions are made here. The members of this board include the school's leadership team, the Research Unit's head, and a parent representative. A second structural link between Laborschule and Bielefeld University is that all educators who participate in one of Laborschule's research and development projects are formally also members of the Research Unit and, thus, of Bielefeld University.
Laborschule's Research Unit is managed by a board of directors, mainly composed of professors from the university's Faculty of Educational Science, including the

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head of the Research Unit. This board of directors makes decisions – on the basis of proposals from the joint management board of the school and from the Research Unit – with regard to every research and development plan, which usually comprises a time span of two years. The board of directors also discusses and decides on the long-term secondment (usually 4 to 6 years) of a teacher who then becomes a research fellow at the Research Unit. After having gained valuable insights into the research processes, these teachers are well-equipped to lead Laborschule's research and development projects and also qualify for future leadership positions at Laborschule or the wider school system.

Apart from this, Laborschule is advised by a Scientific Advisory Board, which is composed of established scholars of education and members from institutions like the Ministry of Education. The Scientific Advisory Board meets once a year to discuss the short- and long-term research and development strategy of Laborschule.

In addition, there are many other collaborations within Bielefeld University. For instance, networking meetings between the Faculty of Educational Science, Laborschule, and Laborschule's Research Unit take place regularly, sometimes together with Oberstufen-Kolleg Bielefeld. As a result of these activities, researchers from the Faculty of Educational Science and researchers from other faculties who focus on subject-specific didactics are involved in some of the research and development projects.

The cornerstone of Laborschule's research strategy is its research and development plan (see also section 4.2). For example, the research and development plan from 2021 to 2023 addresses the following research fields:

Learning from experience: This research strand includes a project in which students overcome a self-imposed challenge, such as going on a week-long bike trip or living without plastic packaging for some time. Two projects also deal with pupils' social learning based on experiences. Another project focuses on the effects of providing students with a free-of-charge ticket for Bielefeld public transport.

Teaching development: This includes the LabSchoolsEurope project as well as two projects that explore how to implement the tools of the digital age at primary and secondary level. Another project focuses on the development of a coherent mathematics curriculum from pre-school to grade 10. Another project aims to train all teachers in project-based learning.

Laborschule in the context of the education system: This research strand includes projects that deal with broader themes. One of these projects deals with the founding period and early years of Laborschule, while another project does participatory action research with students. As the longest-standing project, the so-called *Absolvent*innenstudie* is a longitudinal survey in which Laborschule's graduates since 1985 are asked about their experiences at Laborschule and their way through upper secondary school, vocational training, etc. In a spin-off project, research is

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done on questions emerging from these surveys, mainly using qualitative research methods.

4.2 Planning and conducting Laborschule's research and development projects

The close collaboration between Laborschule and its Research Unit also becomes evident in the various decision-making processes regarding, for instance, the research and development work or the hiring of new educators and researchers.

The above-mentioned research and development plan is the core element of Laborschule's research and development activities. The research and development plan is created in a multi-stage application process, which involves the head of Laborschule's Research Unit, Laborschule's educators, and the school council, the Scientific Advisory Board, the joint management board as well as the board of directors of the Research Unit. Applications for new research projects can be prepared and submitted by all educators. To this end, they usually form research groups and, if possible, closely collaborate with a member of the Research Unit.

All research and development processes are embedded into a specific cycle that focuses on developing, testing and improving an innovation and, in case it proves successful, on its implementation and evaluation. This cycle is typical for action research (Sheikhattari et al., 2022): locating the issue at hand within practice and theory, defining the question the project wants to address, looking for insights using scientific approaches and methods, discussing these findings with other educators at Laborschule as well as at conferences, and maybe even finding new aspects that seem to be worth looking at. If it turns out that there is indeed a need for further research, this first exploration cycle can be followed by a second innovation cycle. In our experience the orientation phase is of particular importance. It is already at this early stage of the cycle that some initial research can be undertaken to explore the practical issue which forms the starting point of every research and development project at Laborschule.

The application process for new research and development projects is similar to other research grant schemes. First, during the consultation process, which is accompanied by the head of Laborschule's Research Unit, particular emphasis is placed on the relevance of the issue at hand for Laborschule, the scientific community as well as for policy-making discourses. Once a research and development project has successfully undergone the application process, the participating educators are granted a reduction of their teaching workload for two years. For this purpose, Laborschule has a pool of 90 hours to distribute to individual teachers. After two years, every project group has to either submit a final report and/or their publications, or they have to apply for an extension. In this latter case they present, among other things, their work to date and preliminary results.

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4.3 Key research principles of Laborschule

After outlining the structures and processes that shape the research activities at Laborschule, we provide a more in-depth portrayel by drawing on the key research principles, which have already been outlined in the introduction to this volume.[1]

Transdisciplinarity: It is not only the idea of crossing the boundaries between different disciplines, but also between school and research practices that has shaped Laborschule's work from the start. The school has always worked towards dissolving the boundaries that separate researchers and educators. Initially, teachers were able to also do research just as much as researchers were also able to teach. For this reason, at first there was no distinction between different professions. Rather, teachers, psychologists, researchers, together with many others, were responsible for developing, testing and evaluating new forms of teaching and learning directly within the everyday school setting. To put this concept into practice, Laborschule introduced a general reduction of the weekly teaching hours for all teachers. Since all teachers at Laborschule were engaged in research at that time, they were referred to as „teacher-researchers". This meant that they did not have to teach as many hours as teachers at other schools, thus being able to dedicate more time to preparing, reflecting on, and evaluating their work from a scientific perspective. While this strict practice of not distinguishing between different professions has been revoked over the years, the systematic cooperation remains a central component of Laborschule's work. Unlike in Laborschule's early years, there is now a clearer distinction between Laborschule as a school (with approximately seventy educators) and its Research Unit (currently comprising four researchers). Members of both institutions, educators and researchers, closely collaborate on various research and development projects (*Forschungs- und Entwicklungsprojekte*). Even though teachers who participate in these projects still receive a reduction of their teaching workload, it is no longer a general part of every educator's job description. Instead, teachers can apply for these reductions for a period of usually two years within the framework of the school's research and development plan. Fortunately, this results in almost all teachers at Laborschule participating in a research and development project at some point during their teaching career.

Collaboration: When attempting to locate the research and development work of Laborschule on the continuum of collaborative relationships between educators and researchers developed by Schlesinger-Devlin et al. (2017, p. 40), which was presented in the introduction, what becomes apparent is an emphasis on the middle part of this continuum: the teacher-faculty collaborative team. Educators of Laborschule and researchers of the Research Unit collaborate – oftentimes with the support of a number of other colleagues from Bielefeld University – in teams of

1 For more information about Laborschule's teacher-researcher model see Gold et al., 2022; Hollenbach & Tillmann, 2011; Zenke, 2018.

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four to six persons on diverse research projects that are carried out within a specific period of time (usually between 2 and 4 years). These projects can be described as focusing on a specific topic and are particularly dedicated to developing and disseminating innovative pedagogical practices. All project members involved take on a double role. Project members from the school act both as practitioners and as researchers, while the members of the Research Unit participate both as researchers and as members of the school. This means that although researchers do not teach, they are actively involved in school development processes, for example, by (co-) designing internal teacher training courses or supporting the design of teaching concepts, curricula, etc.

Beyond this formal collaboration between educators and researchers in the context of research and development projects, there are also numerous opportunities for informal exchanges between the two professions. As Bielefeld University and Laborschule are located right next to each other, educators and researchers also encounter each other frequently in their everyday lives: be it in the open staff lounge of Laborschule, in its cafeteria, during joint conferences, at festivities or simply by chance. And if there is a need for further exchange, all teachers have the opportunity to drop by spontaneously at the school office of the head of Laborschule's Research Unit, who offers an open office hour at Laborschule one day per week, while otherwise being at Bielefeld University next door.

Experimentation: In accordance with its conceptualisation as an Experimental School for the state of North Rhine-Westphalia, Laborschule has always placed emphasis on developing new forms of teaching and learning directly within everyday contexts – namely by experimenting. In this sense, Laborschule's founder, Hartmut von Hentig (1988), referred to it as a school open to trial and error, in which neither the solutions nor the exact problems are totally clear beforehand:

> "At an Experimental School [such as Laborschule Bielefeld] pedagogical practices are not perfected through empirical research (i.e. controlled methods). Instead, it is rather the idea of searching, trying, opening up to new problems and solutions, changing perspectives and topics that is at the heart of this process. [...] Therefore, teachers and their awareness of their role at an experimental school are paramount and must be considered when structuring this kind of school. [...] It is only through experimenting that criticism and conformity can be reconciled." (Hentig, 1988, p. 3)[2]

It is also in this sense that today's research and development endeavours are geared towards this idea of "searching, trying, opening up to new problems and solutions" (ibid). This does not only mean that there is an emphasis on teachers generating ideas for research projects from day-to-day school life, but also that there is room for experimenting and adjustments during the research and development process. This latter aspect includes the possibility that Laborschule's research and develop-

2 This quote was translated by the authors of this chapter from the German source text to English.

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ment groups may test alternative approaches or change their research focus towards a new aspect that has only just emerged during their work. The former implies that the research and development projects are allowed to make mistakes: they are allowed to fail and to start over (if they like).

Transformativity: Laborschule has not only modified and developed its own practice over the years but has also continuously worked towards generating knowledge and innovations that are supposed to be helpful to other schools as well as the general school system. For this reason, Laborschule strives to adapt the innovations created in its research and developments projects for its reference systems: Laborschule attempts to contribute to educational research literature, can be of assistance to the wider school system, and may inform education policymaking discourses. To do so, the school mainly pursues four strategies:

- *Welcoming:* Each year, Laborschule is visited by over 1,000 visitors from different schools as well as from scientific and political institutions. These visits may be part of so-called "visitors' afternoons" or they are part of more focused and thematically guided tours and work shadowing. Furthermore, Laborschule is open to external researchers who may conduct empirical research projects at Laborschule in case they are of relevance for the school. In addition, many university students visit the school. Students of Bielefeld University may take part in guided tours, internships, or do research for their Bachelor and Master theses at Laborschule. Students from outside North Rhine-Westphalia regularly visit Laborschule as well, e.g. via study trip seminars (Lernreise).
- *Sharing:* Every year, educators and researchers publish about 50 works on theory, practice, and Laborschule's history in research and teacher journals, academic anthologies and Laborschule's self-published series. In addition, members of the research and development projects regularly present their work and findings at conferences for educators and/or researchers. They oftentimes are also involved in teacher development courses or are interviewed by media outlets. Laborschule's *teacher-researchers* also take over teaching assignments at Bielefeld University or are invited as guest lecturers. Thereby they are also involved in the training of future teachers.
- *Networking:* Laborschule is part of several networks. One of these networks is called Blick über den Zaun (BüZ; roughly meaning "looking beyond the fence"). It consists of various progressive schools that aim to encourage bottom-up school development. Through visiting each other's schools and giving feedback as critical friends, BüZ promotes the direct exchange of knowledge and experience among these schools. The network strives, on the one hand, to promote mutual critical reflection on school and classroom practices and, on the other hand, to exchange and further develop pedagogical practice.
- *Supporting:* Occasionally, Laborschule can offer some support to schools that want to integrate new practices into their everyday school life and classrooms

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– for instance via workshops or consultations. This type of support, however, generally exceeds the capacity of Laborschule, which is why it is only feasible in exceptional cases.

5 Pedagogical principles

After having presented and discussed the research approach of Laborschule, we would now like to shift the focus to its pedagogical concept. Therefore, we take a closer look at what is often called "Laborschule pedagogy" by outlining the four most important pedagogical principles of Laborschule and presenting some elements of its democratic education. Lastly, we will illustrate what this looks like in everyday school life in Laborschule's four different key stages. Key stage I includes years 0 (preschool) to 2 which means that students are typically between five to eight years old. Key stage II comprises years 3 to 5, thus welcoming the eight- to eleven-year-old students. Subsequently, key stage III covers years 5 to 8 with students usually ranging between the ages of eleven and thirteen. Finally, key stage IV includes years 8 to 10 which means that students are usually fourteen to sixteen years old.[3]

5.1 School as a space for sharing experiences and living together

Laborschule strives to be a school whose students feel welcome and enjoy spending their time. This includes enabling students to have a large number of diverse experiences. Teaching follows the principle of learning through and from experience while largely rejecting the notion of primarily instructing students. The idea of school as a space for experiencing and living together promotes learning opportunities that students can benefit from during their school day: a wood and metal workshop, a kitchen, a creative workshop, laboratories for natural sciences, a big school garden on the school premises including chickens and guineapigs, a forest garden in the school's neighbourhood, a school library that is open all day long, a learning bureau, a big gym, a gymnastics hall, a disco, a room for art lessons, a music room, and several booths for music practice. Outside, there is a natural playing ground where students have access to wood planks and tools, a playground with swings, a spinning turntable as well as structures for climbing and balancing, and a station for renting playing equipment, including drift go-karts with pedals and inline skates. There are a few facilities at Bielefeld University that students are allowed to use as well (e.g. a swimming pool). Apart from this, Laborschule considers itself a school that forms part of the city, meaning that its work also entails offering learning opportunities that take into account its neighbourhood, nature, community, and region.

3 The following sections are based on Groeben et al. 2011

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5.2 Being part of a community

Laborschule aims to serve as a bridge between a student's life in their family and an adult's life in society. Young students' learning takes place along the different parts of a day. Lessons are not structured according to different subjects and instead take into account overarching topics, questions and issues that transcend individual subjects. In line with an increase in differentiation of learning and the different approaches for certain subject matters, areas for and of experience emerge. With an increasing level of specialisation of learning activities and types of learning, the conventional school subjects emerge step by step over the course of a student's years at Laborschule.

Laborschule students' learning takes place in various, slowly expanding group settings. The smallest reference unit is the group setting. Apart from this, there is the year group, key stage and whole school. By combining obligatory classes and courses that students choose according to their own interests, students get to know learning situations in different, oftentimes mixed-age groups. At Laborschule, maturity and responsibility are not considered goals for the distant future but, instead, are essential components of everyday learning. Dealing with issues and problems, be it in the group or elsewhere, therefore is part of day-to-day school life at all age levels. A space for dealing with these issues is provided in the daily assembly of each group, the student parliaments of the key stages and the parliament of the whole school. The group assembly serves as a forum for interactions, discussions and conflicts of all sorts. Here, students may experience that there is a way and that there are measures that can be taken to deal with these issues in a peaceful and rational manner on a daily basis. Here, they learn how to voice their own needs and opinion and to respect other people's views, to look for solutions and, at the same time, to stand up for their own convictions.

Both living and learning at Laborschule aim at promoting values such as responsibility, independence, and cooperation. The youngest students already responsibly perform certain tasks for the community. For them, it is self-evident that not everyone has the same duties. They recognise that individual students or small groups work on different tasks and that students take learning into their own hands or work with others.

The school building and its premises allow for many options for shaping, re-designing and adapting the space to the needs of its inhabitants. The building therefore was created as an open-space environment in which each group is assigned its own space. This so-called *core area* allows each group to be aware of the neighbouring groups and to also be able to get in touch with them. As a result, the building serves as a space for the community which requires its inhabitants to behave and act accordingly.

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5.3 Living with differences

Laborschule embraces the vision of diversity as enriching the school community. As a consequence, learning is largely individualised, thus taking into account the students' different learning paces and their varying interests, needs and abilities. Laborschule students live and learn together in groups that encompass both different age groups and heterogenous performance levels. Laborschule does not support practices of excluding or homogenising students. There is no repeating classes and no outer differentiation, instead students may choose from different classes. In addition, students receive individual feedback regarding their learning and social behaviour in the form of personal conversations and development reports.

5.4 School as society on a small scale

Laborschule considers itself a community for all people learning, teaching and working here that accept and respect each other in their diversity. The behaviours that society expects from adult citizens can and should be acquired in everyday school life: peacefully and rationally dealing with issues and aiming to solve the community's challenges. This type of learning is achieved by means of responsibility and participation. In such a small-scale society individuals learn to develop a sense of responsibility for their tasks and, increasingly, for their own learning path. The structure of the different key stages at Laborschule aims to incorporate these principles.

6 Democratic education at Laborschule

The democratic principles of Laborschule are in general based on the idea of school as an *embryonic society* introduced by John Dewey (1899/1976, p. 12). As Kurz et al. (2022) outline, Laborschule aims to represent such a small-scale democracy. In order to achieve this goal, the student body mirrors society itself, and more specifically, the population of Bielefeld. Therefore, student intake is based on certain criteria to ensure that all social groups are represented proportionally. The idea of the *embryonic society* still guides Laborschule's pedagogical work towards being a democratic school today. In this sense, democracy is not only a lesson topic explicitly taught in politics classes or projects, but also an integral part of everyday life and living in a school community. Students and grown-ups as citizens of Laborschule both have rights and obligations. Teaching democratic principles and learning to live together as well as to participate in a community are not isolated elements, rather they are embedded into various situations of everyday life. Students are encouraged to act responsibly.

In this section, we outline Laborschule's spiral concept according to which students learn to participate in society on a small scale from the beginning to the end of

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their school life. Naturally, younger students have other means and opportunities for participation than those who are about to leave school.

6.1 The helper system

From day one, students experience how to act responsibly within a group. Every student has an older student as a helper to guide them through a school day: exploring the school area, helping with the learning tasks and being a playmate. After their first year at Laborschule, students become a helper themselves for the ones who are starting pre-school in year 0 at the age of five. When students move from stage I to stage II, which is also accompanied by a change of buildings, they again get one or two helpers to support them while starting into year 3. In this new part of the building there are new things to explore and learn about: rooms for crafts, the cafeteria, the gym or the students' cafe, to mention but a few.

6.2 Learning plans and project work

From the beginning of key stage I (year 0-2), students learn very independently and decide what and when they learn. They set their own goals together with their teacher and may then pick from different working areas and options. Each student's learning path is therefore designed with and accompanied by their teacher. Each student has their own study plan or schedule. Sometimes there are joint projects with other groups, e.g. a circus or music project in stage I or subjects may be combined in stage II (year 3-5) when working on topics like space, refugees, current affairs, and other things they are interested in. At the end of such a project, students present their work to each other. Sometimes this presentation may be a special event, other times it may take place during the daily assembly. At key stage III (year 5-8), there are two substantial social and learning changes which for most children take time to adapt to. On the one hand, students now learn in age-homogenous groups and, on the other hand, the timetable gets more split up into subjects. Within the subjects, there still are a lot of options to pick a topic according to one's interest, but students also have to learn that they might have to study some things they would not choose otherwise. This is a gradual process during which teachers need to accompany their students and offer help according to their needs.

6.3 Making group relations and issues a priority

After an open check-in phase, there is a daily morning assembly in each group. On Monday morning this is a school-wide time to talk about school life, group issues or individual questions and requests which might be important to the group. Students take the lead during these morning meetings, which serve as an orientation and help structure the day as well as ease the start into a school day. The daily assembly in each group usually starts with some time to talk about what is happening at home, what the students experienced or how they feel – whatever is

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important to them in that moment. The assemblies give students the opportunity to present products, texts or ask questions about new topics and questions. They listen to their peers, their issues, problems or presentations. One of the effects of the daily assembly is giving students a feeling of safety. They know that there will be an assembly the next day at the latest. Hence, the heterogeneity of the group is, on the one hand, very apparent and, on the other hand, a natural part of their group from day one. During the assembly, educators also have time to explain, for example, how the school works in general or what will be a learning topic over the next days or weeks.

6.4 Being aware of oneself and expressing your feelings[4]

One of Laborschule's research and development groups focuses in particular on Rosenberg's non-violent communication. The participating educators and researchers are Laborschule's in-house experts in this area and train colleagues and students. Rosenberg's approach to communication is split into four steps to prevent and resolve miscommunications. The aim of this method is to express your own feelings and needs and make them transparent for others (if necessary). At the same time, children and grown-ups learn to be aware of other people's feelings, to listen and to negotiate a solution for conflicts in a respectful way (see Freke 2022). That way students learn that their feelings are respected, their voices are heard and that an occurring conflict can be solved. Here, they have a safe environment and feel secure. In the end, this leads to a better understanding of both other people's as well as one's own feelings and needs. Referring to the land animal with the largest heart, Laborschule's version on non-violent communication is called *Giraffe language*.

6.5 Engaging with society beyond school life

Many topics find their way into daily school life. World issues are addressed even with the youngest students, because many children see things on TV or in a newspaper and want to talk about what they have seen and are eager to learn more about that topic. Such topics can be elections, COVID-19, tragedies like natural disasters and terror attacks, climate protection, etc. Moreover, almost every group at Laborschule has students with a refugee background. Naturally, students are interested in learning more about each other and their (new) classmates. Students from Laborschule also took part in the *Fridays for Future* movement and the climate protests. As mentioned above, students' learning process is guided by a more subject-based timetable starting in year 6. Whereas any subject might be an entry point to talking about politics in general, the interdisciplinary subject German/Social Sciences in particular plays a major role for discussing politics and society at large. Until year 10, there are class projects about people with disabilities, children from

4 You can find more information and materials here: https://www.labschoolseurope.eu/solving-conflicts-peacefully/

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around the world, the Middle Ages, and other history topics. On top of that, Laborschule is an UNESCO school and therefore is committed to incorporating the 17 sustainable development goals (SDGs) into its subjects whenever possible. The annual class trip is always related to political, environmental or cultural topics. For example, year 6 students travel the region around Bielefeld and experience its nature and humans' impact on it. During that time, students live and learn together for a week, preferably in a self-sustained house or campground, where they cook and clean for one another. This process continues throughout the following years: In year 7, students go on a trip "into the snow". In years 8 and 9, students can participate in a language exchange and finally, in year 10 every group goes on a cultural trip to Italy. All these trips are incorporated into the curriculum and therefore prepared in advance during various lessons and reflected on afterwards.

6.6 Participating in school life

Laborschule identifies itself as a space for living and experiencing life. Every child and adult is asked to actively participate in it. Issues of everyday life are discussed and solved within the groups. Additionally, student committees are an important part of every key stage at Laborschule. Key stage I and II (year 0-5) have a student parliament. The parliament meets once a week and consists of student representatives from each group. It is a voluntary board, which holds its meetings during one of the lunch breaks and is open to everybody. The participating students select two educators to support them and accompany the meetings. At key stage I, two older students support their younger peers by representing this stage. The parliament serves as a forum in which students can address and discuss issues within the community of the key stages. From year 6 until year 10, each group annually elects a representative. Those representatives meet on a regular basis and discuss school issues and look for the person in charge or the appropriate institutions they might have to address along the way. For example, they initiated a veggie day, which started out as a proposal from a single student. It was taken to the parliament where it was discussed first, before it was adopted, and has since then become an integral part of the school cafeteria's meal planning. To institutionalise student participation, Laborschule also developed a unique school constitution; in fact, there are two constitutions, one for key stage I (year 0-2) and one for key stage II (year 3-5), which take into account the age differences and subsequent needs of students. The school constitutions address all school-related issues. For example, they lay out when students are able to make decisions for themselves (e. g. whether to wear a jacket outside or not), when students have a voice in decision-making processes and when they do not have a say (e.g. for safety reasons during class trips).[5]

5 For more information about Laborschule's school constitution, see here: https://www.labschoolseurope.eu/bill-of-rights/

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6.7 Living and learning in a democratic space

The close link between everyday school life and democratic education at Laborschule is significantly strengthened by its architecture: Designed as an open-plan school, it almost completely dispenses with the spatial separation of individual groups in classrooms and instead endeavours to educate all students together in an open learning landscape under one large roof. This decision was motivated by the idea of reflecting the educational principles of the school as a democratic „embryonic society" on a spatial level: by creating a "civilising" public sphere through its open layout; by allowing the entire school community to experience each other as a unity when letting one's gaze wander in this open space; by providing a multitude of meeting possibilities and allowing all its inhabitants to switch flexibly and spontaneously between these possibilities; and by providing diverse, especially informal, opportunities for encounters between students as well as between the generations. For this last reason, the "staff room" of Laborschule Bielefeld is also part of the open-plan space – and as such freely accessible to all students (Zenke, 2018).

7 Everyday school life at Laborschule

After having outlined the pedagogical principles and some elements of the school's democratic education, we will showcase what this looks like in everyday school life in the following section.

7.1 Day-to-day school life at key stage I (Years 0-2)

Being a student at Laborschule is a different kind of school experience when comparing it to a the experiences of a student at a conventional German school. Starting from a student's very first day, everything is geared towards a personalised, strengths-oriented, democratic, and above all celebratory experience. In fact, it begins even before the first day of school. The day before class starts, every new student is welcomed – a huge celebration with present and future students, family, friends, and faculty. The current students sing, dance, and perform for the new students, before each new child is gifted a sunflower signifying growth, beauty, positivity and difference. Sunflowers come in all sorts of wonderful different shapes and sizes, after all – as do their new owners.

Every group consists of around 16 students and a team of two pedagogues; a teacher and a social educator, who support every student in their individual learning goals. The groups are mixed-age groups. For a smooth transition, students at Laborschule start school at the age of five - one year earlier than is usual for the German school system. The students are therefore between the ages of 5 and 7. The philosophy behind the mixed-age groups is to strengthen peer-teaching and support. Older Laborschule students take great pride in assisting their younger classmates (and, at

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the same time, help to further develop their own social skills). Another important element is the helper system (see section 6.1), whereby each grade 0 student is assigned two older buddies who support them, look after them, show them the ropes, and mainly answer any questions they may have about the school.

The morning assembly for each group starts at 8:30 a.m. However, the un-fenced, open-plan school grounds are buzzing with students from 8:00 a.m. onwards, thus allowing every student to start at their own pace. Assemblies are a major part of the communication and democratic education system within Laborschule. In this context, it is notable that a large proportion of students participate in them. Students moderate the assemblies, they lead the conversations, propose topics, tell stories, and assign responsibilities such as announcing the daily schedule, taking register, or describing the weather in a foreign language. Students and educators, usually a tandem, decide on matters such as next tasks, projects, and food choices for lunch. The assemblies in house 1 (the building for approximately 200 students from key-stage I) are usually concluded with a story, read by the teacher. One of the noteworthy and touching sights during storytime is the myriad of listening positions adopted by the students. They may sit, stand, lie, lean, snuggle (or all of the above). Laborschule recognises its students' rights to listen and learn in a way that feels comfortable to each of them.

Another important democratic element of Laborschule is the Giraffe language (see section 6.4). Giraffes famously have the largest hearts of all land animals and Laborschule students and educators try to communicate with each other with similarly big hearts. Talking and interacting with each other should be conflict-free, respectful, and polite – just like a giraffe. This goes not only for informal classroom or playground communication but also within the many school parliament bodies. Each group elects two representatives (of any age) who join the two educators elected by the students to meet once per week to discuss group matters and key stages matters, such as playground architecture, in the school parliament for key stage I (see section 6.6). In addition, each group decides on specific issues affecting their group such as where to put shoes, how conflicts are sorted out, and which park to visit next.

Every day at key stage I follows the same routine but without a fixed timetable. The day is divided into learning sessions (60 minutes) and breaks, and the motto is organically combining living and learning throughout the day. Learning sessions consist of learning how to read, write and do maths as well as project work, art, music, English, learning about nature, cooking, baking, acting, dancing, swimming, PE, etc. The aim is to find a stable balance between concentrated academic work, relaxation and play time.

A pivotal maxim at Laborschule is that students do not receive any grades for their work until year 9. Instead, detailed developmental and reinforcing feedback is given either verbally or in written form. In addition, each student's performance is

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discussed at regular meetings with parents or guardians, the student and educators. Each child also receives a personalised report at the end of each school year.
Inclusivity, diversity, awareness and acceptance are core elements at Laborschule. Educators work hard to make any special needs support feel part of the day-to-day. Special needs educators, social pedagogues and psychologists situationally accompany students with or without special needs as part of the regular school routine.
The whole school building was designed to have multiple learning and relaxation areas but without traditional classrooms (see section 6.7). Students may move freely around the different areas. The outside play areas could be described as areas that students can roam freely rather than as typical playgrounds. The outdoor area consists of multiple spaces with hills, tunnels, swings, slide, trees, lawns, etc. to attract the students to play to their hearts' content. Lunch completes the timetable with each group eating together in the school dining hall at staggered lunch times.
The parents or guardians play a central role in their child's education. To this end, there are confidential drop-in sessions with a social educator, social worker or psychologist as well as parent-teacher meetings, a parents' council or parent-student afternoons. The latter are informal gatherings in the school organised by the parents and students and celebrated together with the teachers and social needs educators. This includes barbecues, games afternoons, crafts sessions, group cooking events etc.
Each student in house 1 spends two nights per school term away from home sleeping, playing and discovering new things together with their classmates and educators on a class trip. These typically take place at youth hostels and are an addition to the numerous excursions (e.g. museums, zoo, concert, farm, playground, nature, etc.) during the school term.
To round off the celebratory nature of Laborschule, there are different festivities. For example, the whole of house 1 dresses up and parties for a whole school day to celebrate carnival. Then there is the house 1 concert where students, educators and alumni entertain the students, their families, and friends with music and performances. At the end of the term, the final house 1 celebration takes place as a farewell celebration for the second year students during which the students and adults send off the oldest ones to house 2 with a giraffes heart and the ubiquitous Laborschule song, which is adapted to have a line about every single student and their character.

7.2 Day-to-day school life at key stage II (Years 3-5)

Key stage II at Laborschule Bielefeld consists of nine (currently eight) groups which, like all groups, are named after colours (cobalt, green, topaz, azure, reseda, orange, navy, turquoise, and olive). Years 3, 4 and 5 are taught in mixed-age groups, as they were at key stage I, so that the respective groups consist of 20 to 24 students between the ages of eight and ten. There is one teacher who is permanent-

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ly assigned to these (learning) communities and who teaches almost exclusively in this group. Our experience shows that having a permanent reference person is important for students at this age. The teacher represents consistency in everyday school life and is someone to whom they can address their concerns, questions, and needs at any time. Since the groups are mixed age, this community changes a little every year, so that new opportunities and challenges arise at the beginning of each school year. The oldest students in the group have to also find and master different ways how to live and learn with students from other groups. They can choose two basic courses of key stage III, which are also taught in mixed-age groups (years 5/6/7). In these courses, they are – in contrast to their regular group – among the youngest students. These courses can be chosen according to individual preferences so that sports, technology, gardening or a second foreign language besides English can be chosen.

Community life is strengthened by various activities and projects. For example, there is a helper system that helps new students of the third year to have a smooth transition to key stage II at the beginning of the school year, especially because these students also switch to a new building. At the same time, the older students in the group take on more and more responsibility for the other members of their small community in the mentoring process. This idea is also realised in various overnight stays at school and the annual one-week group trip to different places in Germany. The group trip is firmly anchored in Laborschule's own travel curriculum (see section 6.5). While at key stage I the destinations are still in or around Bielefeld, key stage II groups already travel throughout Germany.

Festivals and celebrations are of particular importance during key stage II. For example, at the beginning of each school year, the transition to year 3 (students moving from key stage I to key stage II) and year 6 (students leaving key stage II for key stage III) is celebrated extensively with a ritualised procedure, including a polonaise through the whole school building and a banquet in the new group. Similarly, the farewell of the students in year 5 is celebrated at the end of each year.

Another important community aspect is learning how to deal with issues in a peaceful and reasonable way by taking over responsibilities and by all members participating, just as it is expected of adults in society at large. Therefore, the forms and modes of communication acquired at key stage I are broadened and deepened. In particular, the daily assembly is an essential component of this pedagogy. It is used for conversations and contributions and also to express conflicts and wishes. In addition, the group council with its fixed, ritualised procedure is another form of self-organisation. It also serves to raise and explain concerns to the other students of the group, to discuss them and, if needed, to look for common ground so that every student can feel heard, seen and respected with regard to their concerns and needs. Topics that are relevant for the whole key stage II are brought to the key stage II parliament (see section 6.6).

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However, it is not only the concept of living together as a community, but also the idea of learning in a community that are based on the principles of responsibility, autonomy, and the willingness to collaborate. Every group is made up of different individuals with numerous varying abilities and needs. On top of that, a third of each group's students changes due to the mixed-age groups every year. Lessons, therefore, need to create a setting in which everyone can participate and where everyone can receive the support that fits their abilities and needs. This approach always keeps an inclusive perspective in mind and is guided by the principle of learning from and by experience (see section 5.1). Every topic and issue is made accessible for various learning styles and students can choose individually, thus allowing everyone to learn at their own pace. The differentiation of learning and the process of specialisation of each student that began at key stage I continues and increases at key stage II. This individualisation of learning is viewed as a benefit to the community as opposed to arrangements that lead to isolated learning next to each other. On the contrary, individualisation is explicitly understood as learning from and with each other.

Another feature of learning and teaching at key stage II is that instead of following the conventional division into subject lessons, there are so-called comprehensive classes which comprise all subject areas and can be designed individually by the teacher. This allows for an individual and flexible implementation of the key stage II curriculum depending on the group and teacher. It is, however, important that the students have covered all areas of learning and the respective topics during their three-years at key stage II. Only Physical education (P.E.), Swimming, English, and Technology lessons are partly taught as subject lessons. This is due to specific security measures and teacher's competences.

Learning at Laborschule can be described as both practical and transcending the boundaries of individual subjects. This approach is frequently implemented via group and project work with regard to topics including outer space, vehicle engines, your biography, or Pascal's triangle. These contents are also explored in learning spaces outside of the school context, e.g. at the school garden, the museum or the forest. Students often present their work in the following formats: reading self-written poetry and stories, acting in a play, presenting a film. During parent-child afternoons, parents can experience first-hand, what their child has worked on and how.

Each student learns according to their individual learning plan. It is thus perfectly natural for each student of a group to work on different tasks at their own learning pace, and, as a learner, to be responsible for their own learning. In practice, this is achieved through an individually organised rhythm of the school day.

Starting at 8.00 a.m., school begins with an open start so that the daily assembly can take place at 8.30. All lessons are 60 minutes long. They include exercises on arithmetic, writing and reading, work phases dedicated to the students' projects,

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and shared mealtimes. The teacher and the students in the group can adapt and change the daily rhythm to fit their needs at any time. The aim is to find the right balance between rest and movement as well as concentration and relaxation each day. Therefore, the timetable sometimes changes for the whole group (bicycle trip, walk in the forest). This type of flexibility can also be applied to individual needs, for example, if students need a short break to move around and stretch their legs or if they decide to swap the official break times with learning phases for themselves. They could, for instance, continue working on their assignments while everyone else is having a break, and then take time off from learning at another time.
Moreover, there are spaces where students can choose their activities in a highly self-determined way: on the construction playground, they can build their own hut with a hammer, saw and pliers or make a campfire; in the school zoo, the small animals (guineapigs, chickens) have to be taken care of; in the creative workshop, students can express themselves artistically; the music room and the disco are for making music and dancing; on the sports field, they can move their body.
Students receive different kinds of feedback for all activities, but never numerical grades. From peer assessment – students give a written feedback to each other – to written or oral feedback from adults, there are various ways to make individual learning explicit and visible to students and parents. In addition, there is a compulsory thirty-minute consultation with each family twice per year. In this meeting, the teacher, parents, and student discuss what the student has learned so far and, together, they agree on further steps and goals. At the end of the school year, each student also receives a written report in form of a letter. It addresses the most important milestones of the individual student's achievements, successes, and challenges of the past school year and points towards possible next steps for the student's further growth and development. These measures replace the report cards students typically receive at German schools.

7.3 Day-to-day school life at key stage III/IV (Years 6-10)

Having spent their whole school career at Laborschule in mixed-age groups, students experience a new setting once they enter year 6 and, by that, key stage III: they become part of a group of students of a similar age. This transition gives them a feeling of excitement and a bit of pride. From their perspective, they now belong to the older ones. Nevertheless, they enjoy having four (stage III) or seven (stage IV) lessons per week in mixed-age groups to meet younger and older students. These are great opportunities to maintain old friendships or start new ones.
The first lesson of every week is scheduled for the group to start the new week together. This lesson is reserved for group issues and for addressing and resolving conflicts, holding elections or planning trips and activities – all of which until now had taken place at the daily assembly (see section 5.2).

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Most of the lessons take place within the main group of the same age. There is always one educator who teaches two or three of the main subjects. A large number of groups also have a co-teacher for support. In order to foster stable relationships, the fluctuation of teachers in a specific group is kept as limited as possible.
At key stage IV (years 8-10) several changes take place. First, from year 8 onwards, students pick one course as another main subject for three lessons per week. They may choose from artistic courses (Theatre, Music, Arts), literary and social courses (Social Sciences, Ethics, English), science courses (maths, Crafts, Nature) or physical-education courses (P.E.). These courses are important for the final qualification as they count just as much as maths or German. The second change is that more self-organisation is requested from the students. Every year each student takes on a self-chosen project for a year. This may be writing a text, building something or exploring a new field of interest. This process, which always includes a written part, is accompanied by an educator and is also part of the report card.
At the end of year nine, report cards with numerical grades are introduced. Until then most students will have developed a sense for their own learning and studying. This makes it easier to deal with this process. What also stands out at Laborschule, is that these grades are not only based on oral and written products but also include the development of each individual. This is particularly difficult for teachers and requires ongoing conversations and reflections. Therefore, students at Laborschule are monitoring their own learning from very early on.
In addition to this, a large part of school life both in key stage III as well as in key stage IV is about creating experiences for students outside of the classroom (see section 6.5). There is a class trip every year and each trip is embedded into the curriculum. For example, there is a trip into the snow which is a big focus in year 7. The preparation includes forming cooking groups, calculating ingredients (maths), learning about the environment (natural sciences and social studies), writing a diary (English, German) and inline-skating (P.E.) as preparation for skiing. On-site, students cook for each other in small groups, hold presentations about animals or plants, draw landscapes, go hiking and learn how to ski. Back at Laborschule, they write a diary about their experiences. Similar structures are in place for the other trips or internships. In year 6, there is a trip to an outdoor destination close to Bielefeld for five days. After the trip into the snow, the next outside experience is a one-week internship at a Kindergarten. In year 8, students participate in an exchange with a Swedish, Polish or English school as well as a self-organised challenge project. At the end of year 8, there is a two-week internship at a company of the students' choice. In year 9, they visit the exchange students from Sweden or Poland and again they do a two-week internship at a workplace of their choice. The final school year is organised around a cultural trip to Italy, where students live in groups in small cabins on a camp site and have to organise food and living together by themselves. In preparation for this trip, students become experts for a specific

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topic. They then use this knowledge to act as their own tourist guides during their trips around the area.

8 Conclusion

In 2024, Laborschule Bielefeld will celebrate its fiftieth anniversary. This will be a time for Laborschule's community to look back on half a century of developing new ways to overcome inequalities within German education as well as supporting students on their way to becoming citizens that can positively shape society. To this end, numerous approaches have been developed, evaluated, adjusted, and disseminated. Yes, some things may have changed in the last decades. For instance, while in the beginning all teachers were meant to engage in research, today, the research process is more structured and Laborschule's educators are supported by a Research Unit. What has prevailed, however, is the Laborschule pedagogy and its unique teacher-researcher model.

It is an opportunity to remember all of the wonderful educators and researchers of the past, whose work and ideas guide Laborschule's path to this day. Therefore, the anniversary will be a moment to look back and feel pride to follow in such big footsteps. It will also be a moment for Laborschule's educators, researchers, students, parents, and alumni to celebrate the accomplishments of the past and present. At the same time, we take a look into the future to see the paths that Laborschule and its community will be able to build for the coming generation. Nevertheless, the question is and always will be: How to keep reforming a reform school? We believe, that part of the answer lies in Laborschule's engagement in and with research. In our research and development projects, Laborschule's educators together with researchers from the Research Unit share the aspiration to further the transformation of our school as well as the German education system by means of transdisciplinary, collaborative and experimenting research.

So what might the future bring for Laborschule? One challenge in the not too distant future will be the remodelling of its iconic school building. But whatever challenges may arise, what will undoubtably be helpful facing them is the collaboration with others – within the school, with Bielefeld University, across the city, in North Rhine-Westphalia, throughout Germany, across Europe and even beyond.

Having been the only laboratory school in Europe for many decades, the opportunity to collaborate with laboratory and university schools on the *LabSchoolsEurope* project is a sheer delight. Working with fellow European educators and researchers from Austria, the Czech Republic, England and France, getting to know their schools and practices as well as their national traditions and local contexts has been a wonderful experience. But even more important: it provided us with invaluable insights that are essential for reflecting on our own practices.

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In this context, the conference "Researching Schools: Bridging Research and Practice at Laboratory and University Schools" that took place in Bielefeld in September 2022 will be remembered fondly for a long time. It was not only the highlight of the LabSchoolsEurope project, but also the very first European conference for laboratory and university schools. Fortunately, over one hundred school leaders, educators and researchers from all over the world participated. They introduced their schools, shared their experiences and knowledge, discussed new approaches, and got to know each other better, which is an invaluable basis for future collaborations. These two days not only provided important impulses for Laborschule's future work, but also built the foundation for the future collaboration of European laboratory and university schools. With this in mind, we are looking forward to a time when schools across Europe can collaboratively work on their shared mission.

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