

# Respect goes both ways

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## Abstract

The importance of good relationships at various levels (pupils in the class and school, teacher(s), parents, school management, wider community) lies at the roots of our understanding of the school as a learning ecosystem where child agency and respectful communication are the key. Possible tools to achieve this are a) raising awareness in future teachers during their teacher training; b) implementation of democratic principles at school level in the form of a school parliament, school council, and parents' council, which as living bodies meet and communicate regularly. All this is underlined by the key value of the school's philosophy, i.e. social responsibility towards broader community and the system of education.

## Keywords

education, teacher training, democratic principles, child agency, school parliament, cooperation and partnership

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## 1 Introduction

As teachers and teacher trainers we have always been concerned with bridging the gap between theory and practice. Even though teacher education programmes at our faculty (Faculty of Education, Masaryk University in Brno) offer a good balance of courses in general didactics and pedagogy, courses which focus on the subject-matter, and teaching practice courses which take place at our faculty schools under the supervision of experienced mentor teachers, for students it does not automatically mean that they are able to link the theory and practice and create a practical, clear picture of what teaching, learning and school is and even what it might be like in the future.<sup>1</sup>

One of the options of bridging this gap took form of a course called Challenging Conventions where our students, future teachers, are led to realise that despite all the efforts, time and expertise invested in the changes currently taking place in schools, there are some persistent stereotypes that we might be in a way blind to. We could think of them as certain undesirable conventions lying in the blind spot which does not allow us, the participants of the teaching/learning process, to see them. Or even worse, we might be aware of them, but believe that, however imperfect or directly wrong they are, we have nothing more effective to replace them with. The students need to realise that there are other options, which very often require a different perspective on the part of the on-looker. This is exactly what the course we offer to our students aims at: looking at certain phenomena from a different perspective.

Opening new perspectives on certain phenomena in education would be unthinkable without a close connection to current practice and life in the schools which seek innovation and whose teachers are regarded as leading practitioners in the process of school and educational changes. When explaining how changes in education take place, Fullan (2020) speaks of research in education which is constantly trying to catch up with the innovations initiated and implemented by a country's leading schools and teachers rather than of a type of visionary research that could be ahead of what is actually happening in the schools. The school we look at for inspiration, new perspectives and

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<sup>1</sup> Recently, at the Faculty of Education, Masaryk University, Brno, a new system of teaching practice courses was introduced and new tools which should support students during the process of becoming teachers were developed, e.g. The Standard of Quality of Professional Competencies of Student Teachers (Kratochvílová, J. & Svojanovský, P., 2018).

also for evidence is the Labyrinth – Brno Laboratory School which in its turn has the ambition to stay connected to and informed by recent research. Hence the mutually beneficial and potentially fruitful cooperation between our two institutions. The following text seeks to provide an account of different forms of cooperation and partnership in and outside the school, which for most of our teacher trainees is an eye-opener and a great source of inspiration. Consequently, many of them later decide to closely observe and research various aspects which the school as an ecosystem brings to life (Luksha, 2018).

## 2 Labyrinth: creating democratic culture of partnership and cooperation

When founding the Labyrinth school in 2016, we wished to create a school where the potential of each child could develop and where the child would become an integral part of a real community, of real life in the way envisioned by John Dewey (the founder of the concept of laboratory schools). Therefore, in a broader context, we perceive school not only as a place for learning, but also a place of meeting and sharing, a place of innovations, a centre of community and arts, a space where real life in its genuine forms takes place.

The name of the school refers to the fact that, just as each of us is different, we may find different ways in the complexity of the world through which we can learn about the world around us and achieve our goals. This is expressed in the school motto: “I will find my path through the world”.

The aim of the school is, with respect for different needs and individualities, to create opportunities and motivation for lifelong learning. Therefore, a necessary condition for the fulfilment of the school’s vision is the constant work on the democratic culture of the school, both in terms of values, attitudes, skills and knowledge. We are aware that to achieve such goals, the vision of the school must be a shared vision. That is why we strive to create partnerships and collaboration not only among those who are part of the school, i.e. students and teachers, but parents and other partners who also become an integral part of the school community – the learning ecosystem. They bring their experience, philosophy and concrete activities to the school, and through coherence and collaboration, they can all work together to support the fulfilment of the vision.

Figure 1: This table illustrates the lived values supported in Labyrinth.

Respect	I act with respect to others and to myself. I believe in my own value and in the internal value of all people around me. I act honestly and fairly with respect to not only the environment but also feelings, culture, and opinions of those who surround me.
Consideration	I think about others, I am aware of their needs and I sense their feelings. I am kind and empathetic to others.
Exceptionality	I strive to achieve my personal maximal success and at the same time I am aware of my contribution and responsibilities for the success of the team, community I live in. I always try my best; I permanently want to improve. I am not afraid to attempt unfamiliar things. New opportunities are my stimuli for personal growth.
Morality	I adhere to common ethical principles. I do the right things at the right time and I am not scared to stand up for things I believe are right.
Responsibility	I am responsible to myself. I am honest and sincere and finish tasks I have started. I am responsible for my behaviour towards people and the environment that surrounds me.
Resilience	I believe in myself. I know that when I make an effort to achieve something I can do it. I know my strengths that I develop, and weaknesses that I work hard on. I am not afraid to accept new challenges. I can adapt to unexpected changes and perceive them as new chances.
Harmony	I promote social cohesion. I appreciate cooperation, tolerant communication, and reciprocal trust. I see diversity as an opportunity for learning and growth.

Here we quote Luksha who says that “school as an ecosystem is an organization where people are connected by mutual ties in school and out of school (Luksha, 2018, p. 6).” Similarly, Senge (2008, p. 26) states that “where the school, as a living system, takes its vitality and energy from the commitment that people involved invest, personal mastery, shared vision, and team learning can flourish.”

These partnerships and collaboration were built even before the school was founded in 2016. Since 2011, the functionality of transferring research from the university setting to the primary school setting and action research in the school had been tested. At the Deblín Primary School, where the founders

of Labyrinth School originally worked, a collaboration with the Geographical Institute of the Faculty of Science of Masaryk University in Brno focused on the sustainability of the Deblín landscape in the Tišnov region. The project brought together the university, primary school, and public administration. The aim of the project was to strengthen environmental awareness and practical steps in improving the quality of the environment. The output of the project was a textbook on Deblín region on its way to sustainability and also the Atlas of Deblín region, for which some of the materials were prepared by the pupils of the primary school.

The establishment of the school itself was preceded by the creation of a number of networks and partnerships, which enabled the creation of a model school that did not exist in the Czech Republic until then. At the international level, the establishment of the school was supported by the International Association of Laboratory Schools (IALS). At home, a think tank was created to provide conceptual support for the school in its early days.

Collaboration and partnership at different levels play an important role in the functioning of the school. Partnership and collaboration between teachers and pupils is explicitly declared in the school's code of conduct, which emphasises openness, respect and mutual listening (see Figure 1). Relationships and partnerships are further promoted in the school through other formal and informal means, such as the following:

the school is part of the International Association of Laboratory Schools IALS network;

the school is part of the Labschools Europe network;

the school is in the network of the faculty schools (for teacher training);

the school is involved in a number of national and international projects;

the school maintains partnerships with other schools in the Czech Republic and abroad (see Section 2.5).

## 2.1 Children-school cooperation

Regular meetings between the school management and pupil representatives take place in order to obtain feedback and suggestions for the school development. These meetings are held with the idea of promoting understanding of

how representative democracy works. In the dialogue, children learn to verbalise their ideas and support them with sound arguments. They also learn to listen to and consider ideas of other parties present.

Informal communication and cooperation between pupils and between pupils and teachers in an online environment are promoted, too. One of the outcomes created this way is an educational YouTube channel made by the pupils of the school themselves.

Mentoring and buddy programmes for pupils have been introduced in which an older pupil or a peer supports another pupil or pupils, for example running a Minecraft club, or peer teaching during project days. There are also regular whole-school meetings called “A Year in the Labyrinth”, organised by children and teachers together. A new representative body is the Student Parliament where children’s active participation is encouraged (see Figure 2).

Figure 2: Example of pupil participation in the formation of the Student Parliament

The formation of the Student Parliament was a *process*. We came to the need for this representative body at the beginning of the 2021/2022 academic year, in the 6th year of the school’s existence, which was related to the increase in the number of children at primary as well as lower-secondary level.

In the first phase, it was important to recruit coordinators from the teaching staff. Support from the Centre for Democratic Learning, which is a patron of the pupil parliaments, was also helpful at this stage. We also had the opportunity to take inspiration from other schools where pupil parliaments are already in place (e.g. the European Laboratory Schools network or progressive schools in the region).

We left the creation of the parliament to the children themselves. Our eighth graders, as part of their social science subjects, took part in a project week dealing with human identity, human rights and obligations in a democratic society, as well as power and its various forms. In an intensive project week, they explored the possibilities of participation and prepared presentations for each class on how it is possible to get involved in the life of the school and influence what happens there exercising their agency. They explained what the Student Parliament (SP) is and how children can get involved. Afterwards, elections were held in each class for the SP " two SP representatives were elected from each class. In total, a council was formed with 32 members.

## 2.2 Cooperation at teacher level

The school management explicitly supports teacher collaboration at the planning, implementation and evaluation stages of the instruction. There are regular meetings of year group teachers, primary teachers and lower-secondary teachers, competency teams, and the wider and middle management.

Tandem teaching was piloted in 2021/2022. A number of thematic projects are carried out in each school year, which are dependent on close collaboration between all teachers. Besides, the school operates a system of collegial support which includes the function of the introducing teacher who provides support and assistance for newly qualified, inexperienced teachers; “Peer Inspiration Week” in which teachers observe their colleagues’ lessons to inspire each other, “A Day without class teachers” which is a special day that all class teachers dedicate to writing verbal assessment while the classes are taught exclusively by the non-class teachers. And there is an online communication platform, the Confluence, a virtual environment used for sharing and planning.

## 2.3 Collaboration between the school management and teachers

Teachers create a Personal Teaching Development Plan which is discussed with the school management at the beginning of every academic year. During the academic year, teachers are entitled to receive support to be able to implement their plan (e.g. training, seminars, supervision, etc.).

Teachers also get support from the school counselling centre which employs a school psychologist who can offer individual consultations regarding any issues, such as well-being and burn out syndrome prevention. To support teachers’ well-being in more concrete terms, there are for example team-building stays with the possibility of using wellness services.

## 2.4 Cooperation with external parents

There is a number of activities and representative bodies in which parents are involved. They are part of the School Council which is a body that votes on the most important school’s decisions. Parents also run the Parents’ Association, participate in tripartite meetings (child-parent-teacher) held for evaluation and future planning. There are special meetings called “themed cafés for parents”,

most importantly for parents of the future first graders. School party is another example of informal meeting of parents and friends of the school.

A great asset of this kind of cooperation is the use of parents' expertise and experience in teaching (introducing a profession, a particular skill, etc.), including parents' TedEx. Amongst other things, parents also contribute to the school newsletter.

## 2.5 Cooperation with other partners

Other partners are regularly involved in the school's activities and connect the school to the wider community and the real world. One of the examples is the Moravian Gallery based in the city of Brno, which is our partner for the project *School as Gallery, Gallery as School*. Another organisation, SE.S.TA (<https://www.se-s-ta.cz/home.php>), is the school's partner in the project called *Movement to schools* aimed at expanding and enriching the range of methods and forms of teaching in the field of health and physical education, reaching out to arts through dance.

*Space Academy* is yet another project based on a long-term cooperation with several partners being involved: the Observatory and Planetarium of the capital city of Prague, the Brno Observatory and Planetarium, the S.A.B. Aerospace company, which participates in unique space projects of the European Space Agency, and the CzechInvest agency, which organizes an event called Czech Space Week, focused on the space industry in the Czech Republic. These partners prepare a series of onsite or online learning sessions for the pupils, everything taking place at weekends as an optional extra-curricular activity.

## 3 Conclusion

In the article we tried to outline and provide examples of two types of cooperation and partnership, which we believe not only contribute to, but actually shape the democratic culture of our teaching institutions. The base line of cooperation is the Labyrinth Laboratory School and the network of partners who create the learning ecosystem described above. The other line connects the Faculty of Education, the institution responsible for educating future teachers in the Czech Republic, with this high-profile laboratory school through teaching practice courses and courses aimed at classroom or school research. It creates



an invaluable opportunity for our students to look into the everyday life of the school conceived as a living organism in which nothing is taken as finished and where teachers and pupils alongside with other partners strive to develop as a learning community.

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