

Transparency on the inside and open to the outside world

Experiencing the open space of Laborschule Bielefeld

by Rainer Devantié, headmaster of Laborschule Bielefeld

When I first entered Laborschule Bielefeld in the summer of 1992, I was a teacher trainee in Duisburg and on an educational trip to the two experimental schools in Bielefeld, which are Laborschule Bielefeld – with students up to 16 years of age – and Oberstufen Kolleg – an upper secondary school. Until then, I had only been familiar with regular school buildings. School buildings that conform to the official specifications for school buildings: a certain square metre for each child in the classroom, plus subject rooms, maybe a canteen, corridors, stairs, a school yard. When I first encountered the open space of Laborschule, I was fascinated above all by the wall-free interior, which gives you a feeling of space and openness without having the dullness of an industrial production hall.

We had a meeting of all the trainee teachers on one of the open-space fields. Our topic was an introduction to the pedagogy of Laborschule. A pedagogy based on connecting with the world of experience of the children and young people and letting them be a part of participatory teaching that ultimately enables them to work as self-confident subjects in shaping a democratic society. The connection between the openness of the space and the desired participatory pedagogy was almost a physical sensation.

The second time I experiences the open space of these two experimental schools was exactly 20 years later. I clearly perceived the openness of the architecture, and at the same time that one can also feel safe in an open space. In the meantime, I had worked as a teacher in various countries, including nine years in Finland at the German school in Helsinki. During that time, I had the opportunity to get to know some new Finnish school buildings. I noticed that Finnish school architecture had almost completely abandoned traditional school buildings. In the newer buildings, there were only large rooms that could be divided with flexible walls in necessary. There was a lot of glass, the entrance areas were friendly, very airy, many wooden elements, and oftentimes there were ramps, which are helpful for all users including disabled people. I had a strong impression of transparency towards the inside and openness towards the outside. This is precisely the impression conveyed by the buildings of the two experimental schools, which have retained a modernity in their almost 50-year existence that has been clearly perceived in recent years as exemplary for new school buildings.

“Laborschule sees itself as a place of learning and experience which offers children of different ages and backgrounds a variety of opportunities for development and growth.” (Bosse, et al., 2017, p. 185)

As I am now working as a head teacher of Laborschule, I experience the great importance of the open space for the practised experiential pedagogy every day.

Laborschule has two buildings, House 1 and House 2. The structural concept has been implemented most clearly in House 1 (for Years 1-2) and is still preserved in its original form. The space of House 1 offers all children and adults various opportunities to meet, to gather, to learn, together or individually. According to the idea of the school's founder Hartmut von Hentig, it is possible to perceive the world outside from any point in the building, “where trees grow, birds fly around, other houses stand” (Hentig, 1997, p. 122).

The atmosphere in this building captures everyone who enters. It is not loud and noisy, which is what many visitors who come to Laborschule for the first time think at first, but it is quiet and homely. This pleasant atmosphere is created by the many plants, the carpet and the furniture, which – despite regular renovations – is getting on in years, but still serves its educational purpose. New furniture, which is ordered at intervals, is always based on successful specifications from past decades. The furniture adapts to the desired pedagogical situations.

The children come to school in the morning and often have longer periods in their timetables for arriving and checking in. During this time, they can find their space in their group and in the area. They will find cushions, tables, chairs, play corners, and sometimes hammocks, so that they can find a meaningful place to learn, rest or play according to their particular needs. Two groups share one big open field, and more groups are located in an open gallery.

A school day begins with a daily assembly. The children sit down either on cushions, on the floor or on benches. In this daily assembly, they discuss the things that have moved them, which concern their own or the group's interests. When the daily assembly ends, there is enough space, so that two groups do not get into each other's ways but can create a group situation at different tables at the same time in order to carry out their tasks. Should a parent-child afternoon take place in the evening, it is easy to prepare the entire area so that presentations can be shared and that parents feel welcome there.

This basic idea of flexible furniture in an open space without walls, which allows for many different learning and group situations as well as being experienced as a homely place by each group, continues in House 2 (years 3-10).

There, too, are three open space fields shared by years 6-8, each hosting three groups. The year groups 3-5 are accommodated in the galleries.

House 2 also houses the administration and the offices of the school's leadership team. Both administration and school management have offices. However, the doors of all those working there are always open, unless there is a sign on the door saying not to disturb.

The flat hierarchy and the basic openness are thus reflected in everyday life. Adults as well as children go to the respective offices freely to express their concerns or just to have a little chat with the secretary, the school management members or the caretaker.

No walls and few closed spaces also led to a different concept for a staff break area. For about 15 years, there has been an open area on one of the raised galleries, the so-called Café M (M stand for "Mitarbeiter", which translates to staff). This is where the people meet before classes start and during breaks. One can have coffee or tea and on birthdays, snacks or sweets are shared with everybody. You can sit down at a large meeting table, have a cosy chat on wooden garden benches or discuss plans at smaller group tables. The conversation and meeting rituals of the groups be found here again.

Café M is thus a place of encounter and conversation. The students also come here, but they respect it as a special place for Laborschule's staff. If they want a glass, spoon or plate, they ask nicely and behave like a guest in someone else's home. Since educators and students meet throughout the school day anyway and have many opportunities to talk about things, there is no need for the students to visit the educators' open lounge area for a chat during the breaks. Despite the openness of the space this place is reserved for adults.

Our visitors are astonished to find that, despite the lack of walls, it is rarely noisy in the open space. On the one hand, this has something to do with the soundproof measures, such as carpeting and sound-absorbing wall elements. On the other hand, and this is probably the even more important point, is that the open space has a socially educational function. "In the long run, only one thing

provides protection against the noise in an open space: When I see that there are others who are disturbed by my laughter, hooting and clattering" (Hentig 1997, p. 134).

For lessons that require it to be noisy, there are special rooms, especially for sports, music and theatre. To reach these rooms, one moves along the "Schulstraße" (German for School Street), which is an almost 500-metre-long corridor that connects Laborschule with Oberstufen-Kolleg. If you enter Laborschule through the main entrance, you are directly on this central corridor. From here, all paths lead to the areas, the specialist rooms and the canteen. In the middle of Laborschule and Oberstufen-Kolleg are the gymnasiums used by both schools. These can also be reached via Schulstraße.

However, Schulstraße is not only a functional connecting path, but also a place to stay, to share information and to exhibit art and crafts projects. The display cases on the walls provide information about theatre events, project weeks and the results of art lessons. The Breakfast Club is open during the breaks. Groups can sell snacks there to fill their group coffers. The school shop, also located directly on Schulstrasse, sells teaching materials such as pencils, notebooks, fountain pens or geo triangles for Maths during the breaks. And of course, you can reach the library via Schulstraße, which is open every day and is open to all students and educators at Laborschule.

Schulstraße, connecting Laborschule and Oberstufen-Kolleg, also symbolises the possible path of a student. After completing their first three years in House 1, they move on to House 2 and stay there for another 8 years until their graduate. After that, they may continue on to Oberstufen-Kolleg. From there, after successful graduation, the door opens at the end of Schulstraße to go to the nearby university.

The two experimental schools will be renovated in the near future or rebuild on the same site. It is undisputed among all those learning and teaching at Laborschule and Oberstufen-Kolleg that the principles of the open space as the basis for democratic pedagogy must be maintained at all costs. This was the result of the participatory needs assessment process conducted in 2017 with educators, students, and parents.

To me, the open space of the two experimental schools is such an important part of the pedagogy of Laborschule because pedagogy and space at the two experimental school form an almost ideal combination. It favours social learning and naturally limits frontal teaching situations, as it is not acoustically possible to have three groups in one field at the same time. So, I understand the clear vote for the open space also as a mandate for the building process that is now to follow, that this fundamental idea must be preserved at all costs.

Bibliography

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