

Bridges over Troubled Waters: Anchoring Values and Democratic Education, Fostering Civic Skills and International Mindedness

Pascale Haag

LAB SCHOOL PARIS, EHESS

Monika Votava Mandelíčková

LABYRINTH LABORATORY SCHOOL (CZECH REPUBLIC)

Introduction

Educating young people in the contemporary world, marked by global crises, climate change, and other environmental sustainability crises, brings about new challenges. Not only do we need to foster academic knowledge but also social, emotional and civic skills to ensure school success and to help students thrive in a fast-changing world (Cross Francis et al., 2019; Brush et al., 2022; Cipriano et al., 2023).

One way of doing this is to give students opportunities to discover the world and to meet students from various parts of the world in order to increase awareness of the similarities and differences between cultures and societies and work on values at individual and community levels. The European Erasmus+ Agency supports education in Europe and promotes international exchange programmes for both teachers and students.

The current project was born from several years of dialogue between the authors of this paper, who were involved in the foundation of two European lab schools, created approximately at the same time in the Czech Republic (2016) and in France (2017). Both schools had a lot in common: both the Labyrinth Laboratory School and Lab School Paris consider democratic approaches and civic education to be key areas in education. Both schools work with the original ideas of John Dewey and emphasize them in their philosophical approach. They emphasize value education that is important for shaping each child on his or her path to lifelong learning. If the school succeeds in helping students build these solid foundations, they then become confident, grounded, open, and engaged individuals and, above all, independent learners. We also feel that, in order to build this value base, it is important to go beyond school boundaries, to develop new types of cooperation, to learn about cultural differences, and to develop international mindedness.

We first got a chance to collaborate in the framework of the Erasmus+ project LabSchoolsEurope (2019-2022), coordinated by Bielefeld University, which brought together ten institutions

from five countries across Europe: Austria (University College of Teacher Education Vienna, Praxisvolksschule Vienna, Praxismittelschule Vienna), the Czech Republic (Labyrinth Laboratory School, Masaryk University), France (Lab School Paris, École des hautes études en sciences sociales), Germany (Laborschule Bielefeld, Bielefeld University), and the United Kingdom (University of Cambridge Primary School). The project focused on participatory research for democratic education, involving visits to all the different lab schools by a team of teachers and researchers. Anticipating the end of the project, we then looked for a way to prolong this enriching experience and to share it with our students.

In this paper, now that the project is drawing to a close, we propose to share our experience, in the approach of a reflective practitioner, seeking to provide elements that might be useful to other teachers wishing to carry out a similar project in the future. In the first part, we will describe the project's aim and its structure throughout the school year 2022-2023. In the second part, we will present the main theoretical frameworks that inspired and guided us, and in the last part, we will share the main lessons we have learned from this project.

It is to be noted that this project was not conceived as a scientific study with a specific and replicable protocol to be followed; it was rather a concrete pedagogical experience through a collaboration between two laboratory schools aiming at promoting students' awareness about values and cultural diversity. Research was used as a compass all along to help us reflect about the process, with the idea of grounding the conceptions of activities and their implementation in sound theoretical frameworks.

The *Bridges over Troubled Waters* Project

Aims of the Project

Inspiration from the three-year project of European laboratory schools on democratic education and seeing the

impact of mutual cooperation led Labyrinth school and Lab School Paris to decide to go on with content-based cooperation. The Erasmus+ project, Small-Scale Partnership (project number: 2021-2-CZ01-KA210-SCH-000051068), titled “*Bridges over troubled waters: Values in the Czech and French environment as a bridge to active citizenship*,” aimed to anchor values and democratic education, strengthen students’ civic competencies, and activate children for communication, collaboration, and proactive behavior based on historical and contemporary stories about values. It was also focused on creating metaphorical bridges for mutual understanding.

More broadly, this project can be considered as belonging to the field of *value education*, which Zajda (2020) defines as:

a multifaceted process of socialization in schools that transmits dominant values in order to provide and legitimate the necessary link between the individual, the group and society. Values education is a structured process of instilling desirable aspects of moral education, ethical traits and standards. (p. 108)

We are aware that, although values education is a key aspect of pedagogy, it is a complex and contested topic, especially as it can be subject to changes in fashion. One of the specific goals of the project was thus to raise awareness of the normative dimension of cultures and societies, following the trend of value education that focuses on the “enhancement of civic mindedness” (Zajda, 2020) through practical activities.

Organization of the Project

The project was focused on active involvement of the students and teachers of both schools. It consisted of four phases, including two project weeks conducted independently by each school in their respective countries and two joint project weeks, one in Brno and one in Paris. The project was implemented in the school year 2022-2023 (from September 2022 to June 2023).

The schools started with parallel lessons provoking critical thinking about values, uncovering the content of the word value, defining their personal values and their role in their lives. Later, the students focused on values around us (within the school, historical context, community/society or country). Thanks to these themes, the students were able to perform “mini research projects” and experienced the scientific process: stating a hypothesis, formulating research questions, gathering data, and processing data.

The first phase of the project was followed by a face-to-face meeting of all participating students in Labyrinth School, Brno in December 2022. The students shared their findings about values and transformed them into practical activities. They had a chance to work with local artists on murals at school and enhance the school environment.

The third phase of the project was focused on the theme of communicating values. A deeper understanding of values enabled the students to think about concrete steps or activities that could be done to promote values and take action on behalf of the community.

Through the implemented activities, both schools created conditions for values to become lived values for students, contributing to the improvement of the well-being of individuals and the entire learning community. Key competencies, especially civic, communicative, social, and problem-solving skills, were developed. The Labyrinth students went on with enriching the school environment by creating relaxing zones for their schoolmates. Lab School students focused on transformation of values into original songs, composed and performed by a school band created within the framework of the project.

The final meeting of both schools in Paris in May 2023 was a celebration of project achievements (see Appendix). A deeper understanding of values built metaphorical “bridges” between schools, nations, and generations, helping change ingrained stereotypes and reinforcing selected values. Ultimately, it led to active involvement and addressing societal issues.

All the activities were published in the “methodology,” which includes lessons for teachers that are available both in printed and online versions¹. The meaning of the word “methodology” in this context is different from what researchers usually expect. In this case, it refers to a pedagogical guide that contains a description of the sequences as we implemented them, for other educators to be able to draw inspiration from them and adapt them to their own learning environments, in the same way as we did in the broader context of the LabSchoolsEurope project for democratic practices². It is unlikely that any sequence will be replicated exactly as we did in our schools, and it is thus quite different from the methodology of a research protocol that aims at enabling other researchers to replicate or to judge the validity of a study.

The lessons are clustered in four chapters: What are the values?, Values around us, How we communicate values, and Values and Active Citizenship. They offer concrete activities for individual lessons or for complex programmes focused on values.

¹ The lessons are available under this link: <https://www.labschool.fr/ressources>
² <https://www.labschoolseurope.eu/democratic-practices/>

A Research-Driven Project

As lab school members, we naturally looked for theoretical frameworks that could guide us to conduct the project. Besides Dewey's general framework of hands-on learning, which does not need to be described in detail in this paper, as it is a common ground for many lab schools in the world, we chose to refer to Schwartz's model of universal values and to take into account the practical implications of values in the students' daily lives: what are the relationships between values, life skills, civic engagement, and well-being?

Schwartz's Model of Basic Human Values

Schwartz's model of basic human values, developed by psychologist Shalom H. Schwartz (cf. Schwartz & Bilsky, 1987), is a theoretical framework that seeks to identify and organize the common values that underlie human motivation and behavior across cultures. The model is based on the idea that individuals and societies prioritize a set of core values, and these values influence attitudes, behaviors, and social interactions.

It identifies ten basic human values, organized into four higher-order categories, each representing a different dimension of human motivation:

Self-transcendence

- Universalism – Understanding, appreciation, tolerance, and protection for the welfare of all people and for nature
- Benevolence – Preserving and enhancing the welfare of those with whom one is in frequent personal contact

Conservation

- Conformity/Tradition – Restraint of actions, inclinations, and impulses likely to upset or harm others and violate social expectations or norms
- Security – Safety, harmony, and stability of society, relationships, and self

Self-enhancement

- Power – Social status and control over others
- Achievement – Personal success through demonstrating competence
- Hedonism – Pleasure, sensuous gratification (shared with Openness to change)

Openness to change

- Hedonism – Pleasure, sensuous gratification (shared with Self-enhancement)
- Stimulation – Excitement, novelty, and challenge
- Self-Direction – Independent thought and action

These values are positioned in a circular structure,

emphasizing their interdependence and potential conflicts (see Figure 1, below). The model suggests that individuals and cultures may prioritize certain values over others, leading to variations in behavior and social dynamics.

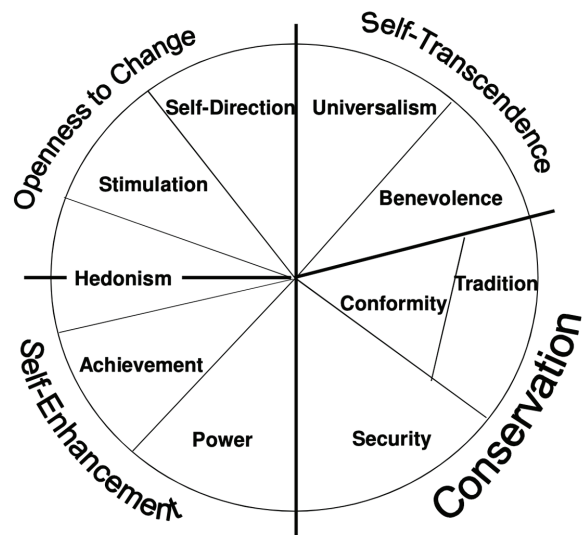


Figure 1. Theoretical model of relations among ten motivational types of value (Schwartz, 2012)

Values, Life Skills, Civic Engagement and School Well-Being

One of the school's roles, besides the transmission of academic knowledge, is to help students become citizens, by promoting civic engagement to sustain democratic societies (Ata, 2019; Biesta & Lawy, 2006; Kahne & Sporte, 2008; Metzger et al., 2018). Schools always impart values, whether explicitly or not. In the framework of this project, we expected not only to raise awareness about values, but also to open up possibilities for the development of emotional, civic, and social skills, leading to prosocial behaviors and civic engagement, while promoting well-being at school (Hart et al., 2014).

We made the deliberate choice to emphasize these dimensions, going somewhat against the tide. Bauml et al. (2022) point out the lack of emphasis on civics in schools, suggesting that it may partly be caused by the "increased pressure schools face from standardized testing and neoliberal policies." Moreover, they observe that "teachers, for a variety of reasons, often opt for value-neutral approaches to the curriculum and avoid discussing controversial issues."

Values education cannot be a theoretical subject: values are also taught by giving the younger generation the opportunity to feel that they are part of society. As suggested by Lenzi et

al. (2014), the level of adolescent civic responsibility is linked with a positive and democratic school climate (i.e., “responsive, challenging, empowering, equitable, and engaging” schools that “scaffold students’ identity journey” and “represent a microcosm of society where democratic principles are in action and can be learned by students”). Civic discussions and perceived fairness within the school are two important indicators of a democratic school climate. This study indicates that adolescents who exhibit greater civic responsibility are also more likely to express a stronger intention to participate in civic activities in the future. As a continuation of the LabSchoolsEurope project, which already focused on democratic practices in schools, our intention was to place greater emphasis on children’s participation and give them opportunities to make their voices heard, even if the project had initially been designed by adults.

Social and emotional skills are the foundation on which civic commitment and engagement is based. There are various classifications of these skills but no fixed list. The Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) recognizes five core social and emotional competencies, which are broad, interrelated areas that support learning and development: self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making. Developing these competencies is crucial for individuals to navigate social situations, work collaboratively, and cope with challenges in a healthy and constructive manner.

The exchange program also aimed at increasing students’ social awareness, relationship skills and their international mindedness (Metli & Lane, 2020) through collaborative activities and comparison between their respective backgrounds. We expected to help them understand and appreciate diverse perspectives and values, to be able to communicate effectively in different languages, to adapt to different communication styles and norms, to promote mutual respect and understanding, to apprehend the interconnectedness of the world, and to encourage a positive, open-minded and adaptable mindset³.

Lessons Learned

Through the implemented activities, both schools created conditions for values to become lived values for students, contributing to the improvement of the well-being

of individuals and the entire learning community. Key competencies, especially civic, communicative, social, and problem-solving skills, were developed. The language skills of students were naturally strengthened throughout the project. A deeper understanding of values built metaphorical “bridges” between schools, nations, and generations, helping change ingrained stereotypes and reinforcing selected values. Ultimately, it led to active involvement in the societal issues being addressed.

At the end of the project, students were invited to give some feedback to the teachers about the project by answering an anonymous online survey with open-ended questions such as:

- What did you learn about your personal values?
- What did you learn about your school’s values?
- Which activities seemed most meaningful to you with regard to the project’s goal
- To what extent has (or will) this project made a difference to the way you think about or live according to your values?

Here are the main elements of the student’s feedback:

Both schools devoted one of the project days to reflecting upon the main values of their respective schools and casting a vote. In Labyrinth school, the students defined these as respect, harmony and friendship/kindness; in Lab School Paris, it was respect, equity and solidarity. One of the students also offered a comment about how the values can be put into practice: “The values are practiced by cooperating on projects and helping people in areas in which you are capable and they are not as much.”

About personal values, the students were invited to share individual answers, reflecting upon their personal attitudes. Respect, for themselves and for others, was frequently mentioned, as well as health (physical and mental) and taking care of their own health, relations (family, friends), and solidarity (helping others and making sure they are fine). Some students elaborated upon their personal values:

- “Love, health and freedom. Love represents my family, friends and my pet. Health – physical and mental – is important for me, so I can do all my daily work with happiness and without pain. Freedom so I can be who I am and express myself.”
- “Honor because without it I would be a bad person. Friendship because without it I would be lonely. Intelligence because without it I would be useless.”

3 The concept of ‘international mindedness’ is particularly relevant in the context of the International Baccalaureate®. In this respect, it is to be noted that Paris Lab School is a *candidate school** for the Diploma Programme. This school is pursuing authorization as an IB World School. IB World Schools share a common philosophy- a commitment to high-quality, challenging, international education- that we believe is important for our students.

* Only schools authorized by the IB Organization can offer any of its four academic programmes: the Primary Years Programme (PYP), the Middle Years Programme (MYP), the Diploma Programme (DP), or the Career-related Programme (CP). Candidate status gives no guarantee that authorization will be granted.

- “Respect, friendship and kindness. I personally think it’s very important to respect people and their personal space because I would like other people to do the same to me. I feel like I always try to apply these three values in my everyday life but sometimes I might not because of my bad mood.”

One of the aims of the project was to foster openness to different cultures, to communicate in diverse languages and to nurture students’ international mindedness. The students mainly appreciated discovering a different country, and learning about its culture, nature, and values. On the linguistic side, it was interesting to note that some of the French students started to learn Czech online – at least a few words – whereas the Czech students already had some knowledge of French. Many of them liked to learn “how to talk to other people,” realizing “that we are all humans, but depending on where we’re from or our backgrounds, we could be different and find some things normal and others not as much.” One important activity in this respect was a song-writing activity in three languages, English, French, Czech, that they performed together afterwards. Some students underlined in their feedback that they better understood values perceived through different eyes such as songwriting together (as well as working on the ladder of personal values).

Answering the last question about the difference this project will make for them in the future, some students explained how important it has been for them:

- “I personally never even thought about values but now after this project, I feel like I am more aware of values important to me. This makes it easier to find the right friends.”
- “It will help me include people who might not know the same things I do, or who don’t find them normal, and teach them. And also for me to learn about other people’s hobbies and things they like to do.”
- “I realized how important and awesome sharing art is, and that not even a language barrier can change that.”

Although the learning experience process within international contexts is known to be “difficult to describe, interpret, and conceptualize” (Erichsen, 2011), and despite the fact that it is difficult to know how participants are impacted over time (Sustarsic & Cheng, 2022), those reflections align with the “transformative potential” reported by slightly older students involved in higher education international exchange programs: developing intercultural competences, improving communication skills in the local language, increased tolerance and acceptance of other values and cultures, better self-confidence, and personal growth (Nada & Legutko, 2022). As noted by Nada and Legutko (2022), “short-term international

study experiences not only favor the acquisition of discipline-based knowledge, but also the acquisition of intangible personal characteristics or soft skills.”

Similarly, evaluating the short and long term benefits for the organizers and the teachers who participated in the elaboration of the program and the activities was not an easy task! Their feedback was mostly centered on the impact of the project on the children. One Czech teacher noted, for instance:

I think the most meaningful activity was contact and communication with French friends – pupils of Labschool Paris. The next was thinking about and researching the values of our school and practical realization of activities to support it. Connecting the project with our history lessons was very innovative and beneficial.

However, the project gave all the participants an incredible opportunity to observe and experiment in a natural setting with different approaches to pedagogy and teacher-student interactions. The need for teachers to become “agents of change” in the context of internationalizing teacher education has been underlined in research since the 1990s (Baily & Holmarsdottir, 2019). This type of exchange program nurtures teachers’ professional development, supports learning communities, helps build peer networks, and opens new doors to learning from across countries and cultures.

Conclusion

In addition to enabling students to get to know themselves better by reflecting on the issue of values, this project also aimed to foster the development of their emotional, social, and civic skills. Since the beginning of the millennium, there has been an increased scholarly interest in the domain of social and emotional skills. They can be defined as a cohesive and interrelated set of psychological abilities encompassing specific knowledge, intra-psychological processes, and attitudes. They facilitate individuals’ autonomy and empowerment, contribute to psychological well-being and optimal functioning, and to the development of constructive social interactions (Lamboy et al., 2022).

Cultivating these skills represents a major concern in public health, education, and social action today. School climate and pedagogical practices contribute to developing a wide variety of skills among pupils and students, such as self-efficacy, problem-solving acumen, cognitive flexibility, divergent thinking, creativity, and social and emotional competencies (Haag et al., 2023). Addressing real-world problems has proven successful in fostering motivation and engagement in young people (Jacquez

et al., 2020). This project aimed at supporting students' self-determined motivation, self-efficacy, and engagement, aligning with research indicating that positive civic outcomes are encouraged by educational contexts that promote supportive environments for identity exploration while offering critical and analytical awareness of societal issues (Adams & Fitch, 1983; Denney, 2022).

The timetable chosen for this project, with several months before the final exchanges of the students and the final results, gave us time for reflective analysis of what had worked well, what could be improved and what we would like to change in a future project. We reflected upon the importance of giving students the chance to make their voices heard. One of the main dimensions we wanted to develop was thus the participation of the young people, which we wanted to strengthen by giving them the opportunity to contribute to the design of a project and its management from the outset to the end.

In Europe, the Erasmus program has become the most important European cooperation program in the field of education and in the promotion of mobility (Martínez-Usarralde et al., 2017). We therefore invited the students to join us in the preparatory phase of a new Erasmus project call. Two representative students (aged 15) and one or two teachers of each school met in Munich (Germany) – halfway between Brno and Paris – for two days at the beginning of 2024 to brainstorm for the next project, which will be submitted to the Erasmus Agency in early March 2024. The student delegates will present the results of this brainstorming to their peers, and the teachers to their colleagues, in order to involve the whole community as much as possible in the development of the project, and to encourage everyone's commitment in the future if the project is accepted.

Work on civic engagement, on the development of social, emotional and civic skills, and on openness to other cultures, languages and societies is not something that happens overnight, but it needs to be pursued, in a variety of ways, throughout schooling – and even throughout life! Our hope is to pave the way for the students' and the school's wider community to feel empowered and equipped to face the societal and environmental challenges inherited from previous generations and to contribute to a better world.

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Appendix

Group activities



Authors' Bios

Pascale Haag is a psychologist and Assistant Professor at the École des hautes études en sciences sociales (Paris). She initiated the creation of the Lab School Network, which aims to put research at the service of educational success and to promote exchanges between all the actors of the educational ecosystem (teachers, researchers, parents, students, companies, public authorities).

Monika Votava Mandelíčková is a Labyrinth Laboratory School teacher and a researcher. She has been working in Labyrinth laboratory school Brno since its founding in 2016. Recently she is focusing on school democratic principles and children's participation, coordinating a school council and a group of regional School Councils within the Local Action Plans for Education (MAP). She is responsible for coordinating EU projects in Labyrinth School.



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