

Article

Teachers' Negotiation of Democratic Risk and Professional Agency in Early Years and Primary Education: Insights from Participatory Research Ecologies

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Abstract

This article examines how teachers in Early Years and Primary Education experience and negotiate democratic risk when enacting democratic pedagogy. Drawing on qualitative data generated through participatory research in Portugal and Croatia within the Horizon Europe AECED project, the study analyses reflections, dialogical exchanges, and collaborative inquiry processes from 33 participants across four cases. Democratic risk is conceptualised as situations in which teachers perceive that democratic pedagogical action may expose them to uncertainty, loss of control, professional scrutiny, or relational tension. The findings identify three interrelated themes: (1) democratic risk as pedagogical, professional, relational, and institutional exposure; (2) the negotiation of legitimacy and accountability; and (3) participatory research as a professional learning ecology supporting teacher agency. Rather than functioning merely as a barrier, democratic risk emerges as an inherent condition of democratic pedagogy and a key site for the development of professional judgement and agency. The article contributes to research on democratic education by introducing democratic risk as an empirically grounded analytic concept and by demonstrating how teacher agency is enacted relationally within professional and institutional contexts. It further highlights the role of participatory research in supporting teachers to navigate the tensions inherent in democratic practice.

Keywords: democratic education; democratic risk; teacher agency; participatory research; early years education; primary education



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1. Introduction

Education for democracy is widely recognised as a central purpose of schooling, particularly in contexts marked by social polarisation, institutional mistrust, and concern about the quality of democratic life. In this context, democratic pedagogy is often presented as a way of fostering participation, dialogue, inclusion, and shared responsibility in educational settings. In Early Years and Primary Education, these aspirations are especially significant because democratic learning is closely intertwined with everyday relationships, practices of care, participation, and meaning-making, rather than confined to formal civic instruction

alone (Dahlberg & Moss, 2005; Moss, 2014; Biesta, 2017). Recent international research has further highlighted growing concern about democratic participation, social fragmentation, polarisation, and declining trust in institutions, drawing increasing attention to the role of schools in supporting democratic engagement, dialogue, and participation in everyday educational life (European Commission, 2020; UNESCO, 2023; Riddle & Apple, 2019).

At the same time, enacting democratic pedagogy in everyday practice is neither straightforward nor risk-free. Teaching has long been understood as a profession characterised by uncertainty, judgement, and indeterminate outcomes rather than by the application of fixed technical solutions (Schön, 1983). This condition becomes even more pronounced when teachers attempt to create spaces for shared decision-making, open dialogue, and pedagogical responsiveness. Such practices may unsettle established expectations of control, predictability, and authority, while also exposing teachers to tensions related to accountability, legitimacy, and professional recognition (Ball, 2003; Perryman, 2009; Priestley et al., 2015).

These tensions are particularly salient in Early Years and Primary Education. In these phases, pedagogy is strongly shaped by relational responsibilities, developmental expectations, and discourses of care and protection. Teachers are expected not only to support children's participation and agency but also to ensure safety, progression, and appropriate conduct within institutional settings. As a result, democratic practice may be experienced as professionally demanding, particularly when it involves opening pedagogical space for uncertainty, co-construction, and responsiveness, which can sit uneasily alongside pressures for order, measurable outcomes, and normative understandings of "good" teaching (Dahlberg & Moss, 2005; James & Prout, 1997; Moss, 2014; Ball, 2003).

Although democratic education has generated substantial scholarship, much of this literature has focused on normative arguments, civic learning, or children's participation, with comparatively less attention to teachers' own professional experience of enacting democratic pedagogy. This gap is especially visible in Early Years education, where democratic practice is often embedded in everyday pedagogical relationships, care, participation, and meaning-making, yet remains less frequently examined through the lens of teachers' professional judgement, uncertainty, and risk. This gap matters because democratic pedagogy does not simply depend on teachers' commitment to democratic values; it also depends on whether they feel able, supported, and professionally authorised to act under conditions of indeterminacy and institutional constraint (Priestley et al., 2015; Biesta, 2017).

This article addresses that gap by examining how teachers in Early Years and Primary Education negotiate what we conceptualise as democratic risk while engaging in participatory research on aesthetic and embodied learning for democracy. The study is particularly informed by recent work within the AECED project emphasising the significance of aesthetic and embodied dimensions of democratic learning and participation (Jääskeläinen et al., 2025). We use the term democratic risk to refer to situations in which teachers perceive that democratic pedagogical action may expose them to uncertainty, loss of control, professional scrutiny, relational tension, or institutional misrecognition. In this sense, democratic risk is not treated as a failure of practice, but as a constitutive condition of democratic pedagogy: a feature of teaching that emerges when educators attempt to sustain openness, participation, and shared meaning-making in settings shaped by accountability, protection, and normative expectations. This framing builds on scholarship on uncertainty in professional practice while extending it toward the specific conditions of democratic educational work (Schön, 1983; Ball, 2003; Priestley et al., 2015). Bringing Early Years and Primary Education into dialogue is particularly important because both phases are shaped by close pedagogical relationships and strong responsibilities for children's participation,

care, and development, yet are also subject to different traditions of pedagogical recognition in research and policy.

Empirically, the article draws on qualitative participatory research conducted within the Horizon Europe AECED project, focusing on teachers' reflections, dialogical exchanges, and inquiry processes in Early Years and Primary Education contexts. The broader pedagogical and conceptual orientation of the AECED project is articulated in its framework and practice guidance documents concerning education for democracy and aesthetic-embodied learning (AECED Consortium, 2026a, 2026b, 2026c). Rather than treating participatory research merely as a data-collection strategy, we consider it as a professional learning ecology through which teachers collectively interpret experience, negotiate uncertainty, and develop forms of agency in relation to democratic practice. This is important because teacher agency is not simply an individual capacity; it is ecologically achieved through interactions among professional judgement, institutional conditions, collegial relations, and opportunities for collaborative reflection (Priestley et al., 2015; Wenger, 1998; Kemmis & McTaggart, 2005).

Three research questions guide the study:

- How do teachers in Early Years and Primary Education understand and experience democratic risk in their pedagogical practice?
- How do teachers negotiate professional legitimacy and accountability when enacting democratic pedagogy?
- In what ways does participatory research function as a professional learning ecology that supports teacher agency?

Together, these questions focus specifically on the professional experience and negotiation of democratic pedagogy under conditions of uncertainty, institutional mediation, and collaborative inquiry.

The article makes three contributions. First, it develops democratic risk as an analytic lens for understanding the professional experience of democratic pedagogy in Early Years and Primary Education. Second, it contributes to research on teacher agency by showing how agency is negotiated under conditions of uncertainty, accountability, and relational responsibility rather than exercised as simple autonomy. Third, it highlights the significance of participatory research as a collective professional learning space in which teachers can interpret tensions, legitimise experimentation, and sustain democratic commitments in practice. In doing so, the article seeks to move beyond abstract endorsement of democratic education and to show more concretely what democratic pedagogy requires from teachers in everyday institutional life.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Democratic Education and Pedagogy in Early Years and Primary Contexts

Democratic education has been widely theorised as both a normative project and a pedagogical orientation concerned with participation, inclusion, dialogue, and shared responsibility. Recent work on holistic democracy has further emphasised the importance of relational, participatory, and embodied dimensions of democratic educational practice across multiple levels of social and institutional life (Woods, 2024). Rather than being limited to civic knowledge or formal instruction, democratic education is increasingly understood as something enacted through everyday pedagogical relationships and practices (Biesta, 2017; Dewey, 1916). In Early Years and Primary Education, this orientation takes on particular significance, as learning is embedded in relational, embodied, and context-sensitive forms of interaction in which children's voices, experiences, and meaning-making processes are central (Dahlberg & Moss, 2005; Moss, 2014).

In Early Years education, democratic pedagogy is often enacted less through formal discussion of civic concepts than through everyday pedagogical encounters involving listening, participation, shared meaning-making, care, play, and negotiated responsibility. Democratic life in early childhood settings is therefore closely connected to how children's voices are recognised, how participation is organised, and how educators balance openness with protection and developmental responsibility. Recent scholarship in early childhood education has further emphasised participation, voice, and rights-based approaches as central to democratic practice, highlighting the importance of creating spaces in which children can express views, be listened to, and exercise meaningful influence within educational settings (Lundy, 2007; Clark, 2010; Moss, 2014; Whittington et al., 2024). Recent studies in early childhood and primary education have increasingly emphasised democratic pedagogy as relational, affective, and embodied practice rather than solely as civic instruction (Murriss, 2022; Wilson, 2023; Liang et al., 2026). These approaches stress that democratic participation emerges through everyday interactions, ethical listening, shared meaning-making, and opportunities for children to influence pedagogical processes. Recent empirical research in early childhood education has also highlighted how teachers' understandings of participation are shaped by institutional expectations, pedagogical traditions, and interpretations of children's competence and agency (Avgitidou et al., 2024).

In primary education, democratic pedagogy often intersects more visibly with curriculum structures, subject teaching, classroom management expectations, and pressures related to progression and measurable outcomes. While participation, dialogue, and co-construction remain central, the enactment of democratic pedagogy may be shaped differently by institutional expectations concerning efficiency, order, and accountability. Work on student voice and democratic fellowship further suggests that participation in school contexts is shaped not only by opportunities for expression but also by the quality of relationships, recognition, and intergenerational partnership through which democratic engagement becomes possible (Fielding, 2011).

Within this field, democratic pedagogy has been associated with practices that foreground listening, co-construction, and responsiveness, as well as with pedagogical approaches that challenge hierarchical teacher–student relations and open space for children's participation in decision-making. However, while these approaches are often framed as desirable and necessary, their enactment in everyday educational settings remains complex and uneven. Institutional expectations, curricular frameworks, and accountability pressures may constrain the extent to which democratic practices can be realised, particularly in systems where measurable outcomes and standardisation are prioritised (Ball, 2003; Perryman, 2009).

Recent empirical research has further problematised the enactment of democratic pedagogy by showing that participation is shaped by institutional norms, pedagogical traditions, and power relations rather than simply enabled by teacher intention (Sant et al., 2018; Lundy, 2007). These studies highlight that democratic practices often remain fragile and uneven, particularly in contexts where accountability and curriculum pressures dominate. This suggests the need to move beyond normative advocacy toward examining the conditions under which democratic pedagogy becomes possible in everyday educational settings. Contemporary research has also highlighted the tensions teachers experience when attempting to enact participatory pedagogies within systems increasingly shaped by performativity, standardisation, and measurable outcomes (Mockler, 2022a; Keddie et al., 2021). These tensions appear particularly visible in early and primary education contexts, where democratic aspirations may conflict with accountability pressures and normative expectations concerning classroom management and curricular pacing.

At the same time, critical perspectives on participation caution against treating voice or inclusion as self-evidently democratic. Participation is always shaped by relations of power, institutional norms, and adult authority, raising questions about whose voices are recognised, under what conditions, and with what consequences for educational practice (Lundy, 2007; Fielding, 2011; Boler, 1999). In both Early Years and Primary contexts, these tensions are intensified by the centrality of care, protection, and developmental responsibility. Teachers are required to balance commitments to participation and openness with expectations of guidance, structure, and safeguarding. Democratic pedagogy, therefore, cannot be understood simply as a set of methods or techniques, but must be approached as a situated and negotiated practice shaped by relational, institutional, and professional conditions.

Considering Early Years and Primary together thus allows for attention both to their shared commitments to participation and relational pedagogy, and to the different ways democratic practice is institutionally framed and professionally negotiated across the two phases.

2.2. Teacher Agency as an Ecological and Relational Achievement

The question of how teachers enact democratic pedagogy is closely linked to how teacher agency is understood. Moving beyond individualistic accounts of agency as personal capacity or autonomy, recent scholarship has conceptualised teacher agency as an ecological and relational achievement, emerging through the interplay of personal, structural, and cultural conditions (Priestley et al., 2015). From this perspective, agency is not something teachers possess, but something they accomplish in and through practice, in relation to available resources, institutional constraints, and professional relationships. More recent scholarship has further developed ecological understandings of teacher agency by emphasising the importance of professional cultures, emotional conditions, and institutional trust in shaping teachers' capacity to act (Heffernan et al., 2022; Liu et al., 2024). These studies suggest that agency is not simply enabled by individual competence, but by whether educational environments legitimise experimentation, uncertainty, and professional judgement.

This ecological view is particularly relevant in the context of democratic education, where teachers are required to make situated judgements under conditions of uncertainty. Enacting democratic pedagogy involves decisions that cannot be fully prescribed in advance, since they depend on the dynamics of interaction, the emergence of children's interests, and the negotiation of meaning within specific contexts. Agency is therefore closely tied to professional judgement, responsiveness, and the capacity to navigate tensions between competing demands.

At the same time, teacher agency is shaped by accountability regimes and performative pressures that may limit opportunities for experimentation and risk-taking. Research has shown that teachers often work in environments where their practice is subject to external evaluation, standardisation, and expectations of predictability (Ball, 2003; Perryman, 2009). These conditions can generate tensions between professional values and institutional requirements, particularly when democratic practices unsettle established norms of control and measurable outcomes.

In addition, research on teacher vulnerability and professional identity suggests that agency is closely linked to how teachers experience judgement, recognition, and emotional exposure in their work (Kelchtermans, 2009; Lasky, 2005; Hargreaves, 1998). These perspectives highlight that professional action is not only structurally mediated but also emotionally and relationally situated, particularly in contexts where teachers' practices may be subject to scrutiny or misunderstanding.

Understanding teacher agency in democratic pedagogy, therefore, requires attention not only to individual dispositions but also to the relational and institutional contexts in which teachers work. It also requires consideration of how teachers interpret and negotiate uncertainty as part of their professional practice. This ecological understanding of agency is particularly relevant in Early Years and Primary Education, where teachers' judgements are shaped not only by curricular and institutional conditions, but also by strong relational and ethical responsibilities toward children.

2.3. Uncertainty, Professional Judgement, and Risk in Teaching

Teaching has long been recognised as a profession characterised by indeterminacy, complexity, and the need for ongoing judgement. Schön's (1983) notion of the reflective practitioner highlights how professionals operate in situations that cannot be fully addressed through technical rationality, requiring forms of reflection-in-action and situated decision-making. In education, this has been further developed through work that emphasises the inherently uncertain and relational nature of pedagogical practice (Biesta, 2017). Recent research has also examined how uncertainty in teaching has intensified in contexts characterised by rapid social change, policy instability, and heightened accountability pressures (Mockler, 2022a; Flores, 2023). These conditions have renewed attention to the emotional, ethical, and relational dimensions of professional judgement in educational practice.

Uncertainty becomes particularly salient in democratic pedagogy, where openness to multiple perspectives, shared decision-making, and emergent learning processes challenge assumptions of predictability and control. In such contexts, teachers may experience tensions related to authority, responsibility, and the boundaries of acceptable practice. These tensions are not simply obstacles to be overcome; they are integral to the enactment of democratic relations in education. Recent work on democratic sensibility similarly highlights the importance of responsiveness, relational attentiveness, and openness to uncertainty within democratic educational practice (Woods & Pažur, 2025).

The notion of risk has been explored in educational research primarily in relation to policy, governance, and accountability, often focusing on how risk is managed, mitigated, or avoided. However, less attention has been given to how risk is experienced and negotiated by teachers in the context of democratic pedagogy. In this article, we build on existing understandings of uncertainty and professional judgement to conceptualise democratic risk as a specific condition of practice: one that arises when teachers engage in pedagogical actions that may challenge established expectations, expose them to vulnerability, or generate unpredictable outcomes.

This conceptualisation shifts the focus from risk as something to be minimised towards risk as a constitutive dimension of democratic educational work. It also opens analytical space for examining how teachers interpret, navigate, and make sense of such situations in their professional practice. While uncertainty is widely recognised as a general condition of teaching, the concept of democratic risk developed in this article refers more specifically to forms of uncertainty that arise when teachers attempt to enact democratic pedagogical practices under conditions of institutional, relational, and professional exposure. In Early Years and Primary contexts, this uncertainty is intensified by the need to hold together participation, care, safety, and pedagogical openness.

While the concept of uncertainty is well-established in educational theory, democratic risk extends this understanding in two important ways. First, it foregrounds the specifically political and relational dimensions of pedagogical uncertainty, highlighting how teachers' actions are not only unpredictable but also exposed to judgement within institutional and normative frameworks. Second, it makes visible the asymmetrical conditions under which

such uncertainty is experienced, where openness to participation may entail professional vulnerability, misrecognition, or sanction. In this sense, democratic risk is not simply uncertainty in teaching, but uncertainty situated within relations of power, legitimacy, and accountability. This distinction allows for a more precise analysis of what is at stake when teachers attempt to enact democratic pedagogy in constrained institutional contexts.

2.4. Participatory Research as a Professional Learning Ecology

Participatory research has been widely used in educational contexts as an approach that seeks to involve practitioners as active contributors to knowledge production, rather than as subjects of study (Kemmis & McTaggart, 2005). In such approaches, inquiry is collaborative, dialogical, and oriented toward both understanding and transformation. Teachers engage in cycles of reflection, action, and analysis, often working collectively to interpret their experiences and develop new forms of practice. Recent participatory and collaborative inquiry research has further emphasised the role of dialogical professional learning environments in supporting teacher reflection, professional identity, and pedagogical transformation (Groundwater-Smith & Mockler, 2009; Priestley et al., 2015). Such work highlights the importance of collective inquiry processes for sustaining democratic and socially responsive pedagogies.

Beyond its methodological role, participatory research can also be understood as a professional learning ecology in which teachers create spaces for shared reflection, mutual support, and collective sense-making. Drawing on Wenger's (1998) notion of communities of practice, such environments enable practitioners to negotiate meaning, develop shared repertoires, and build professional identities in relation to their work.

At the same time, critical perspectives on participatory research caution against assuming such approaches are inherently democratic. Participation may be shaped by facilitation, institutional agendas, and unequal voice among participants (Cooke & Kothari, 2001). This suggests the need for a reflexive understanding of participatory inquiry as a space that both enables and constrains democratic engagement.

In the context of democratic pedagogy, participatory research offers important possibilities. It can provide a space in which teachers explore uncertainty, articulate tensions, and legitimise forms of practice that may not be fully recognised within institutional frameworks. Through dialogue and collective inquiry, teachers may develop greater confidence in navigating the risks associated with democratic practice and in sustaining their commitments to participation and responsiveness.

This perspective is especially relevant for understanding how teacher agency is supported and enacted. Rather than being an individual attribute, agency emerges through participation in collaborative processes that enable teachers to interpret their experiences, challenge assumptions, and develop shared understandings of practice. This is especially significant in educational phases where teachers' work is deeply relational and where democratic pedagogy may remain marginal or insufficiently recognised within dominant professional cultures.

At the same time, participatory inquiry should not be assumed to function as an uncomplicated democratic space. It is also shaped by facilitation, by unequal confidence among participants, by implicit norms of participation, and by the interpretive frameworks brought into the process by researchers and participants alike. A reflexive account of participatory research therefore needs to recognise not only its generative potential, but also its internal tensions and its own conditions of power.

2.5. *Toward an Empirical Understanding of Democratic Risk*

While the literature on democratic education, teacher agency, and participatory research provides important conceptual foundations, there remains a need for empirically grounded accounts of how these dynamics are experienced and negotiated in practice. There is limited research that examines how teachers in Early Years and Primary Education make sense of the tensions, uncertainties, vulnerabilities, and exposures associated with democratic pedagogy. This gap is particularly evident in research that addresses democratic participation normatively but gives less attention to the institutional, emotional, and professional conditions under which teachers must enact it.

This article addresses this gap by bringing these strands of literature together through the concept of democratic risk. In doing so, the study also responds to calls for educational research that engages more explicitly with the complexity, situatedness, and interpretive dimensions of educational practice rather than relying on purely technical or instrumental understandings of pedagogy (Biesta, 2020). By focusing on teachers' lived experiences and interpretive processes, the study seeks to move beyond abstract advocacy for democratic education and to examine what democratic pedagogy entails in everyday professional contexts.

In doing so, the article contributes to a more nuanced understanding of teacher agency as relational, situated, and negotiated under conditions of uncertainty. It also highlights the role of participatory research as a space in which teachers can collectively engage with the challenges of democratic practice and develop forms of agency that are responsive to their contexts.

Taken together, the study is theoretically informed by three complementary perspectives: democratic pedagogy as an indeterminate and relational practice; teacher agency as an ecological and relational achievement; and participatory research as a dialogical professional learning ecology. These perspectives provide the conceptual lens through which democratic risk is interpreted in this article, as a situated and professionally negotiated condition of democratic educational practice rather than merely an individual or technical difficulty.

3. Methodology

3.1. *Research Design*

This study adopts a qualitative participatory research design situated within the Horizon Europe AECED project (Transforming Education for Democracy through Aesthetic and Embodied Learning, Responsive Pedagogies and Democracy-as-Becoming). The project is grounded in Participatory Action Research (PAR), which frames research as a collaborative, iterative, and reflexive process in which participants act as co-researchers engaged in cycles of reflection, action, and collective meaning-making.

The use of PAR is methodologically and theoretically aligned with the aims of this study. Because the article focuses on how teachers experience and negotiate democratic pedagogy, including uncertainty, vulnerability, and professional judgement, it requires an approach capable of capturing interpretation and negotiation in practice. PAR provides such a framework by creating structured spaces for dialogue, experimentation, and reflection, allowing teachers to articulate and examine their pedagogical experiences while simultaneously engaging in professional learning processes.

The analysis presented here focuses on Early Years and Primary Education cases conducted in Portugal and Croatia. While the broader AECED project includes multiple educational phases and national contexts, this article adopts a cross-case qualitative design centred on teachers' lived experiences and interpretations rather than on formal comparative analysis between countries. The article is not intended as a comparative review of

national literatures in Portugal and Croatia; rather, it draws on cases from these contexts to develop an empirically grounded cross-case analysis.

Including cases from Portugal and Croatia allowed the study to examine how democratic pedagogy and professional risk were negotiated across different institutional and national settings, while maintaining a specific focus on Early Years and Primary Education.

3.2. Research Context and Participants

The study draws on data from four cases within the AECED project: Portugal Cases 14–15 and Croatia Cases 1–2, all situated in Early Years and Primary Education contexts.

In Croatia, the sample comprised 21 participants across two cases. Case 1 involved 11 participants, including primary school teachers and kindergarten educators working in different institutions. Case 2 involved 10 participants from a primary school, including class teachers, subject teachers, a school psychologist, and a school pedagogue. All participants took part voluntarily and were actively engaged in the participatory process across multiple phases, including workshops, planning, implementation, and reflection.

In Portugal, the study draws on participants from an online professional development course focused on aesthetic and embodied learning for democracy. From a larger cohort of enrolled participants, 12 teachers/educators (10 primary and 2 early years) completed all phases of the participatory process and constitute the analytic sample.

Across both national contexts, the study therefore includes a total of 33 participants, all of whom were involved as co-researchers in iterative cycles of participatory inquiry. Participants were included in the analytic sample on the basis of their sustained engagement across the participatory process and the availability of sufficiently rich materials documenting their reflections, discussions, and pedagogical experimentation. The intention was not statistical representativeness, but depth of insight into teachers' lived experience of democratic pedagogy across the selected cases.

Participants were recruited through institutional and professional networks associated with the AECED project and engaged voluntarily in the research. Their participation involved active engagement in workshops, collaborative discussions, pedagogical experimentation, and reflective activities.

The cases also differed significantly in their participatory configurations. While the Portuguese case centred primarily on an online professional learning course oriented toward reflective pedagogical experimentation, the Croatian cases involved hybrid and institutionally embedded collaborative workshops situated more directly within school organisational contexts. These differences were analytically important because they shaped how democratic risk was experienced and articulated across cases.

3.3. Participatory Process and Research Activities

The research followed a structured PAR process consisting of interconnected phases: introduction, familiarisation, collaborative reflection, planning, action, and analysis/synthesis. While the overall structure was shared across cases, its implementation varied according to national contexts.

In Croatia, the research was conducted in a hybrid format. Case 1 included two in-person workshops (each lasting two days), followed by online planning sessions, classroom implementation, and three online reflection sessions, concluding with a final in-person encounter. Case 2 consisted of seven encounters, including four in-person sessions and three online sessions, combined with classroom-based implementation of activities by teachers between April and June 2024.

In Portugal, the research took place through a fully online format as part of a structured 50 h professional development course delivered over eight weeks via a Moodle

platform. The course combined synchronous and asynchronous activities, including guided discussions, collaborative reflection, development of pedagogical proposals, classroom implementation, and reflective sharing.

Across both contexts, participatory activities included group discussions and focus groups, individual and collective reflection, pedagogical design and implementation, experiential activities using aesthetic and embodied methods, and structured opportunities for dialogue and feedback. These activities were embedded in iterative participatory action research cycles, enabling teachers to engage in collaborative inquiry while developing, testing, and reflecting on democratic pedagogical practices.

Teachers participated as co-researchers, contributing to data generation through their reflections, discussions, and pedagogical practices, and engaging in iterative cycles of interpretation and learning.

3.4. Data Generation

Data were generated through multiple complementary sources embedded within the participatory process. These included group interviews and focus groups, individual interviews, written reflections and narrative accounts, online discussion forums in the Portuguese cases, questionnaires administered at different stages of the process, concept-definition instruments, researcher field notes and reflexive group notes, and pedagogical artefacts and documentation of activities. Together, these sources provided a rich and triangulated account of teachers' experiences, interpretations, and practices across the different phases of the research.

In the Croatian cases, group interviews (two per case), individual interviews, questionnaires, concept-definition instruments, and field notes were systematically collected, transcribed, and anonymised.

Across both national contexts, audio-recorded data were transcribed, and all materials were anonymised before analysis. Data were organised into a shared corpus for each national case and subsequently integrated into the broader analytical process.

The unit of analysis consisted of meaning-bearing segments within these materials, including excerpts from interviews, reflective texts, discussion episodes, and artefact-related narratives, particularly where participants described experiences of uncertainty, tension, or negotiation in relation to democratic pedagogical practice.

3.5. Data Analysis

Data analysis followed an iterative, multi-stage process combining national-level analysis with cross-case synthesis.

Stage 1: National-level analysis

This process involved repeated reading of the data to achieve familiarisation, followed by the coding of meaningful segments, the identification of patterns and themes, and the iterative refinement of thematic categories. Analysis moved back and forth between individual data sources and the broader dataset, allowing themes to be developed inductively while remaining grounded in participants' accounts. Initial codes were generated inductively from meaning-bearing segments in the data and then iteratively compared across sources and cases. Through this process, codes were clustered into broader thematic groupings, which were repeatedly refined through comparison with the full dataset, researcher memoing, and cross-case discussion. Themes were retained where they captured recurring patterns across participants while remaining sensitive to contextual variation and interpretive tension.

In the Croatian cases, analysis followed a structured sequence including transcript analysis, thematic coding, integration of researcher memos, and comparison with field notes and reflexive materials.

In Portugal, analysis similarly combined thematic and content analysis across multiple data sources, with triangulation between reflections, forum discussions, assignments, and survey responses.

Throughout the process, researchers documented emerging interpretations using the Shared Memoing Matrix, which functioned as a tool for organising insights, tracking analytical development, and supporting transparency.

Stage 2: Cross-case analysis

Following national-level analysis, a cross-case analytical process was conducted across the Portuguese and Croatian datasets. This stage involved collaborative interpretation among researchers, in which themes developed within each national context were compared, aligned, and refined within the broader analytical framework of the AECED project.

Rather than merging datasets into a single coding process, this approach preserved contextual specificity while enabling the identification of shared patterns across cases.

All data generated within the selected cases were included in the analysis. No sub-sampling of materials was undertaken; the analysis aimed to capture the full range of participants' experiences across the participatory process.

Final thematic alignment was achieved through iterative cross-national discussions among the research team, in which emerging themes were compared, refined, and agreed upon through return to the data and collective interpretation.

Table 1 provides an illustrative overview of the analytical process, showing how initial codes were developed and refined into broader thematic categories.

Table 1. Illustration of the analytical process.

Raw Data Excerpt	Initial Code	Category	Final Theme
"I hesitated because I thought I was wasting time. . ."	Hesitation	Professional tension	Democratic risk
"I can speak, but I'm not sure it will be accepted"	Fear of judgement	Legitimacy	Accountability and recognition
"We realised we were not alone"	Collective support	Shared reflection	Participatory research as learning ecology
"Students responded through movement and feeling"	Embodied engagement	Alternative pedagogy	Democratic pedagogy practices

This process was iterative and involved repeated comparison across cases and data sources to ensure that themes captured both recurring patterns and contextual variation.

3.6. Analytical Focus: Democratic Risk

The concept of *democratic risk* was developed through an iterative, data-informed analytical process. During initial coding, particular attention was given to segments in which participants described experiences of uncertainty, vulnerability, tension, or exposure in relation to democratic pedagogical practice.

Through cross-case comparison, instances of democratic risk were grouped into patterns reflecting different but interconnected dimensions. These included pedagogical risk, associated with the unpredictability of outcomes and potential loss of control; professional risk, related to concerns about judgement, evaluation, or perceived competence; relational risk, linked to tensions with colleagues, students, or parents; and institutional

risk, arising from constraints connected to hierarchical structures, accountability demands, or organisational expectations.

This operationalisation allowed democratic risk to function as an empirically grounded analytic lens through which teachers' experiences were interpreted.

3.7. Ethical Considerations and Reflexivity

Participation in the study was voluntary, and informed consent was obtained from all participants. All data were anonymised, and identifying details were removed from transcripts and written materials. Audio recordings were transcribed and subsequently handled in accordance with ethical guidelines for data protection.

Given the participatory nature of the research, ethical considerations extended beyond procedural compliance to include ongoing attention to power relations, representation, and co-construction of knowledge. Researchers acted as facilitators and co-inquirers, engaging with participants in dialogical and reflective processes. This positioning required ongoing attention to the ways in which researchers shaped the participatory spaces in which meanings were articulated, as well as the interpretive frameworks brought to the analysis. Reflexivity therefore involved not only documenting analytical decisions, but also examining how the co-constructed nature of the research may have influenced what participants chose to express, emphasise, or leave implicit.

Reflexivity was integral to the study. Researchers continuously examined their role in shaping both data generation and interpretation, acknowledging that the participatory context influenced the meanings produced. The use of collaborative analysis and memoing supported critical reflection on interpretive decisions and enhanced the transparency and rigour of the analytical process.

4. Findings

The cross-case analysis showed that teachers' engagement with democratic pedagogy was shaped by a persistent tension between aspiration and exposure. Across the Portuguese and Croatian cases, participants described democratic pedagogical work as meaningful and professionally generative, but also as uncertain, emotionally demanding, and institutionally vulnerable. Democratic risk did not appear as a marginal or exceptional difficulty. Rather, it emerged as a recurring condition of practice whenever teachers attempted to open space for participation, dialogue, co-creation, and embodied or aesthetic learning.

Three interrelated themes were identified across the dataset: first, teachers' experience of democratic risk as pedagogical, professional, relational, and institutional exposure; second, the negotiation of legitimacy and accountability when enacting democratic pedagogy; and third, the role of participatory research as a professional learning ecology that supported agency, reflection, and collective endurance. These themes were developed through cross-case synthesis of all Portuguese and Croatian materials and reflect recurring patterns rather than fixed categories imposed in advance. Although analytically distinct, these themes were empirically intertwined and often emerged through tensions between pedagogical aspiration, institutional constraint, and professional self-understanding.

4.1. Experiencing Democratic Risk in Practice

Teachers across the cases consistently described democratic pedagogy as involving a degree of uncertainty that exceeded ordinary classroom unpredictability. The risk they described was not only that an activity might "fail," but that opening pedagogical space for voice, movement, co-creation, or critical dialogue might expose them to loss of control, misunderstanding, discomfort, or challenge. In this sense, democratic risk was experienced as a multi-layered condition: pedagogical, as outcomes could not be fully predetermined;

professional, because teachers worried about how their actions would be judged; relational, because democratic work could unsettle established roles and expectations; and institutional, because such practices did not always fit dominant organisational norms. One Portuguese participant reflected that “sometimes it feels easier to return to more traditional activities because participatory approaches require time that schools do not always recognise as productive.”

This suggests that in Early Years and Primary contexts, democratic pedagogy is experienced not simply as openness to participation, but as a professionally situated form of exposure shaped by the relational and care-based responsibilities of teaching young children.

In the Croatian material, these risks were especially visible in participants’ accounts of speaking, acting, and experimenting within hierarchical institutional cultures. One participant reflected: “I feel free to express my opinion, on the other hand, whether it will be accepted. I believe that it is my responsibility to react,” while another noted that one may express an opinion but still fear that it will not be respected or may even lead to sanctions. These statements show that democratic action was experienced not simply as participation, but as exposure: to rejection, to conflict, and to the possibility that ethical or pedagogical initiative could become professionally costly. These accounts can be interpreted not only as expressions of uncertainty but as indicators of how democratic pedagogy reconfigures professional subjectivity. Teachers are positioned as both responsible actors and potentially vulnerable subjects, required to act while lacking guarantees of recognition. This tension reveals how democratic risk operates within relations of power, where speaking or acting democratically is never neutral but situated within institutional hierarchies that shape what can be said, by whom, and with what consequences.

A similar pattern appeared in the Portuguese cases, although often articulated through the language of hesitation rather than direct institutional confrontation. In one episode, a teacher who had designed an embodied activity reported: “I wanted to continue, but the pressure of the curriculum made me hesitate. The students were enthusiastic, yet I worried I was wasting time.” Here, the risk was not only practical but normative: the teacher experienced a tension between pedagogical responsiveness and the need to remain aligned with expectations of curricular seriousness and efficiency. This example reflects a broader pattern in the Portuguese data, where hesitation was closely linked to concerns about time, curriculum demands, and the perceived legitimacy of non-traditional pedagogical approaches.

Across both national contexts, embodied and aesthetic practices often intensified this experience of risk because they displaced familiar pedagogical forms. Croatian participants described the methods as opening reflection, dialogue, awareness, and empathy, but also as requiring them to move beyond habitual professional comfort zones. Portuguese teachers similarly reported initial scepticism, uncertainty, or concern that such methods might seem inappropriate or insufficiently serious, especially before they observed their generative effects in practice. One Portuguese participant described this shift explicitly: “I realised democracy is not just about discussion but also about how we move, listen, and feel together.” Such moments suggest that democratic risk was not only constraining; it could also become transformative when teachers experienced unfamiliar practices as professionally meaningful rather than professionally risky. This ambivalence is important, as it suggests that the same pedagogical conditions that generate uncertainty may also create possibilities for professional transformation.

Rather than indicating weakness or lack of preparedness, these accounts show that uncertainty is built into democratic pedagogical work, especially in educational phases where participation must be negotiated alongside responsibility, care, and institutional expectations.

A further recurrent feature of democratic risk was the difficulty of sustaining openness in asymmetrical educational relationships. Teachers did not describe democracy as requiring the disappearance of professional responsibility or authority. Rather, they described the challenge of remaining open, dialogical, and responsive while also feeling accountable for safety, progression, and the management of group processes. This was particularly salient in Early Years and Primary contexts, where care and pedagogy were closely intertwined. Democratic practice, therefore, appeared as a form of balancing, often experienced as risky, not between democracy and non-democracy in abstract terms, but between openness and responsibility under real professional conditions. These findings indicate that democratic risk was experienced across multiple interconnected dimensions, which are summarised in Table 2.

Table 2. Democratic risk dimensions.

Dimension of Democratic Risk	Example in Findings
Pedagogical	Unpredictability of participatory dialogue
Professional	Fear of being judged as ineffective
Relational	Tensions with colleagues or leadership
Institutional	Accountability and performative pressures

4.2. Negotiating Legitimacy and Accountability

The second major theme concerned how teachers attempted to make democratic pedagogy professionally legitimate in environments not always organised to recognise it. Across the cases, participants did not reject accountability as such. Rather, they described the need to negotiate between two forms of accountability: accountability to institutional expectations, routines, and externally visible outcomes; and accountability to democratic and pedagogical values such as inclusion, attentiveness, participation, and shared meaning-making. The friction between these two forms of accountability was central to how democratic risk was experienced.

The issue at stake was therefore not only whether teachers valued democratic pedagogy, but whether such pedagogy could be recognised as professionally legitimate within the institutional cultures of Early Years and Primary education.

In the Croatian cases, participants repeatedly described institutions as shaped by hierarchy, uneven voice, and limited participatory decision-making. One participant referred to parallel groups and informal spokespersons who mediated access to leadership, while another described the school as “managed rather than led.” A Croatian participant similarly described how “teachers often avoid more open democratic approaches because they fear criticism from colleagues or school leadership.” These accounts point to an important finding: democratic pedagogy was not enacted within neutral institutional settings, but within organisational cultures already structured by power relations. In this context, teachers’ willingness to experiment with democratic methods was shaped not only by pedagogical conviction but by whether they believed such work would be understood, supported, or at least tolerated.

The Portuguese material revealed comparable tensions in a different format. Because the work took place through an eight-week online course designed as a participatory professional learning space, teachers often described the challenge less as immediate internal hierarchy and more as the need to justify democratic and aesthetic work within the pressures of school routines, curriculum coverage, and dominant understandings of what “counts” as proper teaching. The concern about “wasting time,” despite strong student engagement, illustrates this clearly. The issue was not whether the activity mattered pedagogically, but whether it could be recognised as professionally legitimate within

existing evaluative frameworks. Similar concerns appeared across multiple Portuguese accounts, indicating that questions of time and curricular alignment were central to how democratic pedagogy was evaluated in practice.

Across both contexts, teachers rarely framed legitimacy as a purely individual matter of confidence. Instead, legitimacy was negotiated relationally and institutionally. It depended on the responses of colleagues, leadership, parents, and wider organisational cultures. Where teachers anticipated misunderstanding or indifference, their agency tended to become smaller, quieter, and more tactical. Where they found recognition, they were more willing to persist, adapt, and deepen democratic work. In this respect, the findings show that teacher agency was not exercised outside institutional constraint, but through ongoing judgement about what was possible, defensible, and sustainable within it. This indicates that legitimacy was not a stable condition secured in advance, but a shifting judgement shaped by anticipated recognition, misrecognition, and institutional context.

This also suggests that legitimacy functions not only as a professional concern but as a regulatory mechanism through which certain pedagogical practices are normalised while others remain marginal. Democratic pedagogy, particularly in its embodied and aesthetic forms, appears as a practice that disrupts prevailing norms of seriousness, control, and measurable value, thereby becoming visible as both pedagogically meaningful and institutionally questionable.

The data also suggest that the negotiation of legitimacy was closely tied to teachers' own professional identities. Several Croatian participants linked democratic work to personal and professional growth, but also to the discomfort of confronting entrenched behavioural norms or institutional passivity. Portuguese participants likewise described shifts in self-understanding, especially when democratic and embodied methods led them to see themselves less as transmitters of content and more as facilitators of participation and connection. These shifts mattered because they helped teachers reinterpret risk: not as evidence of professional inadequacy, but as part of what it means to teach democratically in constrained contexts.

This reinforces the importance of understanding democratic pedagogy not as a self-evident good, but as a practice whose legitimacy must be continuously negotiated within specific organisational, curricular, and professional contexts.

4.3. Participatory Research as a Professional Learning Ecology for Agency

The third theme concerns the role of participatory research itself. Across the Portuguese and Croatian cases, participatory inquiry did more than generate data about democratic pedagogy; it created conditions in which teachers could name uncertainty, test alternative practices, compare experiences, and develop professional language for what they were encountering. In this sense, participatory research functioned as a professional learning ecology that supported agency not by removing democratic risk, but by making it interpretable, discussable, and collectively bearable.

These findings indicate that participatory research did not merely document teachers' democratic practice; it functioned as a mediating space in which democratic pedagogy became more thinkable, speakable, and professionally supportable.

This was especially visible in the Portuguese online environment. Over the eight-week Moodle-based course, discussion forums evolved from hesitant and minimal exchanges into more sustained spaces of sharing, reflection, and mutual recognition. One participant reflected: "I felt that we were not alone. Even though we were behind screens, our practices connected, and I could see myself as part of a wider community." This account suggests that agency was supported not only through individual reflection but through a growing sense of collective belonging. The online course did not merely transmit concepts; it enabled a

distributed professional community in which teachers could test ideas, receive validation, and continue dialogue beyond the formal structure of the course.

In the Croatian cases, participatory research played a similar role through face-to-face workshops, reflection groups, interviews, and iterative dialogue. Participants often described the value of encountering others who shared similar frustrations and aspirations. The discovery that colleagues in other institutions experienced comparable hierarchies, silences, and tensions appears to have been professionally significant. It reduced isolation and helped transform personal unease into a more collective understanding of institutional conditions. Support, dialogue, and shared reflection, therefore, emerged not as secondary benefits but as core resources for sustaining democratic commitment.

Across both national contexts, teachers' role as co-researchers mattered. They were not positioned simply as recipients of methods, but as active interpreters and designers of democratic pedagogical practice. In Portugal, participants designed, implemented, and evaluated pedagogical interventions within the online course and documented how students responded to different aesthetic and embodied approaches. In Croatia, teachers engaged across successive PAR phases that included conceptual exploration, implementation planning, classroom experimentation, and collective reflection. These participatory structures enabled teachers to link experience with interpretation and to connect pedagogical experimentation with a broader sense of professional purpose.

The data suggest, however, that participatory research supported agency precisely because it did not present democratic pedagogy as a finished model to be applied. Instead, it legitimised incompleteness, experimentation, and reflection. Teachers were able to explore tensions without having to resolve them immediately into "best practice." This was one of the most important cross-case findings: agency developed not through certainty, but through structured opportunities to remain with complexity in the company of others. This suggests that participatory inquiry functioned as an interpretive and relational infrastructure through which teachers could collectively sustain democratic pedagogical work. What emerges here is not a resolution of tension, but a professional capacity to remain with uncertainty in more deliberate and collectively supported ways.

At the same time, it is important to recognise that participatory research spaces are not free from tension or power dynamics. While they enabled dialogue and recognition, they were also shaped by facilitation structures, expectations of participation, and varying levels of confidence among participants. Not all voices may have been equally expressed, and the process of collective meaning-making may have privileged certain interpretations over others. Acknowledging these dynamics is essential for understanding participatory research not as an idealised democratic space, but as a situated and negotiated practice.

This is especially important in Early Years and Primary Education, where democratic pedagogical work may remain isolated unless teachers have opportunities to interpret and legitimise it collectively.

4.4. Cross-Case Synthesis

Taken together, the findings show that democratic pedagogy in Early Years and Primary Education is experienced by teachers as a situated professional practice shaped by uncertainty, institutional mediation, and collective meaning-making. Across Portugal and Croatia, democratic risk emerged whenever teachers attempted to move beyond procedural or transmissive teaching toward more participatory, responsive, embodied, and co-creative pedagogies. The form that this risk took varied by context, but its underlying structure was consistent: democratic teaching exposed teachers to unpredictability, to scrutiny, and to the possibility that professionally valued democratic commitments might not be institutionally recognised.

At the same time, the findings complicate any simple account of risk as a barrier. The same conditions that generated uncertainty also opened possibilities for reflection, transformation, and agency. Teachers who found collegial dialogue, participatory support, and spaces for shared interpretation were better able to sustain democratic commitments and to reinterpret risk as part of meaningful professional practice. Participatory research did not eliminate institutional constraint, but it did create ecologies in which democratic pedagogy became more thinkable, more discussable, and more professionally legitimate. In this sense, democratic risk and professional agency did not appear as opposites; they emerged together.

Taken together, these patterns suggest that democratic pedagogy in Early Years and Primary Education must be understood not only through ideals of participation, but through the professional and institutional conditions that shape whether such participation can be enacted and sustained. This prepares the ground for discussing democratic risk as a constitutive feature of democratic pedagogical work rather than as a temporary implementation difficulty.

5. Discussion

The purpose of this study was to examine how teachers in Early Years and Primary Education negotiate democratic risk and professional agency when enacting democratic pedagogy within participatory research contexts. Across the Portuguese and Croatian cases, the findings indicate that democratic pedagogy is not experienced as a stable set of methods but as a situated and relational practice shaped by uncertainty, institutional mediation, and collective interpretation. Teachers' accounts consistently suggest that democratic engagement involves exposure to unpredictability in pedagogical processes, to scrutiny within professional environments, and to institutional conditions that do not always recognise democratic commitments as legitimate forms of practice. In this sense, democratic risk emerges not as an implementation deficit, but as a constitutive condition of democratic pedagogy. Recent scholarship has increasingly highlighted the need to understand democratic education not only as a normative aspiration but as a situated and contested practice shaped by institutional, relational, and policy conditions (Riddle & Apple, 2019; Wilson, 2023). The present findings contribute to this emerging conversation by foregrounding the professional experience of negotiating democratic pedagogy under conditions of uncertainty and institutional exposure.

5.1. Democratic Risk as a Constitutive Condition of Democratic Pedagogy

A central contribution of this study lies in showing that risk is not peripheral to democratic pedagogy but intrinsic to it. While the existing literature has long emphasised the indeterminate and relational nature of teaching (e.g., Schön, 1983; Biesta, 2017), it has tended to treat uncertainty as a general professional condition rather than as a politically and institutionally mediated form of exposure. The findings extend this perspective by demonstrating that when teachers enact democratic pedagogy, uncertainty becomes qualitatively different: it is experienced not only as unpredictability of outcomes but as exposure to judgement, misrecognition, and potential sanction within institutional contexts.

This distinction is analytically significant. What democratic risk specifically captures is not uncertainty in teaching in general, nor solely the emotional vulnerability of professional practice, but the situated exposure teachers experience when democratic pedagogical action itself becomes institutionally consequential. Unlike broader notions of uncertainty or "beautiful risk" (Biesta, 2013), democratic risk refers specifically to the possibility that participatory, dialogical, or open-ended pedagogical practices may place teachers in tension with institutional norms of legitimacy, accountability, efficiency, and professional recog-

dition. Similarly, while concepts such as professional vulnerability (Kelchtermans, 2009) and performativity (Ball, 2003) illuminate important dimensions of teachers' experience, democratic risk foregrounds the specifically democratic character of this exposure: teachers become vulnerable precisely because they attempt to redistribute participation, authority, interpretation, and pedagogical openness within institutional contexts that do not always recognise such practices as legitimate.

Much of the literature on democratic education foregrounds participation, dialogue, and inclusion as normative goods (Dewey, 1916; Biesta, 2017), yet pays comparatively limited attention to the professional conditions under which such practices are enacted. The concept of democratic risk developed in this study addresses this gap by making visible the asymmetrical conditions under which democratic pedagogy operates. Teachers do not simply facilitate participation; they do so within institutional environments where such practices may be perceived as inefficient, inappropriate, or professionally questionable.

Recent research on democratic and participatory pedagogies similarly suggests that teachers frequently navigate tensions between openness, participation, and performative accountability structures, particularly in contexts shaped by standardisation and measurable outcomes (Mockler, 2022a; Keddie et al., 2021). However, the present study extends this literature by showing how such tensions are experienced specifically as forms of professional and institutional exposure.

The findings therefore challenge implicit assumptions within the literature that democratic pedagogy can be implemented without cost. Instead, they suggest that democratic engagement requires teachers to act under conditions of institutional vulnerability, where openness to participation may conflict with expectations of control, efficiency, and measurable outcomes.

In Early Years and Primary Education, this tension is intensified by the need to hold together participation, care, and responsibility. Democratic pedagogy therefore emerges not as an "add-on" to teaching but as a mode of professional action that necessarily involves judgement under conditions of exposure. Teachers are not choosing between democracy and responsibility; rather, they are attempting to sustain both simultaneously within institutional environments that do not always recognise democratic openness as professionally legitimate.

What this study adds is an empirically grounded account of how this constitutive risk is lived and negotiated by teachers in Early Years and Primary Education, rather than discussed only at the level of democratic principle. More specifically, the concept of democratic risk makes analytically visible the political and institutional dimensions of pedagogical uncertainty: not only that teachers do not know in advance what democratic action will produce, but that they act under conditions in which such action may expose them to judgement, misrecognition, or sanction. In this respect, democratic risk can be understood as a relational and institutional condition rather than merely an individual perception of uncertainty. This aligns with emerging work emphasising the emotional, ethical, and politically situated dimensions of teaching practice in contemporary educational environments (Flores, 2023; Heffernan et al., 2022).

5.2. Teacher Agency as Negotiated, Relational, and Institutionally Mediated

The findings also contribute to the literature on teacher agency by extending ecological perspectives (Priestley et al., 2015). While existing work conceptualises agency as emerging through the interplay of individual, structural, and cultural conditions, this study shows more specifically how agency in democratic pedagogy is negotiated under conditions of anticipated recognition or misrecognition.

Teachers did not enact agency primarily through autonomy or resistance alone. Instead, agency appeared in situated, often modest forms of professional judgement, including decisions about when to open or contain dialogue, how far to extend participatory practices, and how to align democratic intentions with institutional expectations. These findings complicate more idealised accounts of agency by showing that, in constrained environments, agency may take tactical and partial forms rather than manifesting as overt transformation.

This finding resonates with recent scholarship suggesting that teacher agency in highly regulated educational contexts is often enacted through adaptive, relational, and context-sensitive forms of judgement rather than through overt resistance or institutional transformation (Liu et al., 2024; Dewi & Kuswando, 2025).

Importantly, the study highlights that agency is shaped not only by available resources but by the terms under which professional action becomes intelligible and legitimate. Where teachers anticipated misunderstanding or lack of recognition, democratic practices were often adjusted, reduced, or rendered less visible. Conversely, where relational support and collegial dialogue were present, teachers were more able to sustain and deepen democratic engagement.

This extends ecological models of agency by foregrounding the role of legitimacy as a mediating condition. Agency is not only about what teachers can do, but about what they perceive as defensible within institutional and professional frameworks. In this sense, democratic agency is both relationally and normatively mediated, shaped by the anticipated responses of colleagues, leadership, and broader organisational cultures.

Recent studies have further highlighted that professional trust and collegial recognition are central conditions for sustaining teacher agency and pedagogical innovation (Heffernan et al., 2022; Mockler, 2022b). The findings of this study reinforce this perspective by showing how democratic agency becomes more sustainable when teachers experience collective legitimacy and interpretive support.

5.3. Participatory Research as a Space for Negotiating Democratic Risk and Agency

A further contribution of the study lies in its reconceptualisation of participatory research as a professional learning ecology rather than merely a methodological approach. While participatory action research has long been associated with collaboration and practitioner involvement (Kemmis & McTaggart, 2005), the findings demonstrate more precisely how such environments mediate the relationship between risk and agency.

Participatory research did not eliminate uncertainty; rather, it rendered uncertainty interpretable, discussable, and collectively negotiable. Teachers were able to articulate hesitation, compare experiences, and move from individual concern toward shared understanding. This suggests that the significance of participatory inquiry lies not in providing solutions, but in creating conditions for sustained engagement with complexity.

Contemporary participatory and collaborative inquiry research similarly emphasises the importance of dialogical professional learning environments in supporting teacher reflection, identity formation, and pedagogical transformation (Priestley et al., 2015; Groundwater-Smith & Mockler, 2009). The present findings extend this work by demonstrating how participatory inquiry specifically mediates teachers' capacity to remain engaged with democratic uncertainty.

This finding extends the existing literature by showing that professional learning in democratic pedagogy depends not only on acquiring methods, but on developing shared interpretive frameworks through which teachers can make sense of their experience. In this respect, participatory research aligns methodologically with the practice it investigates:

it models dialogue, co-construction, and reflexivity while enabling teachers to sustain these practices in their own contexts.

At the same time, the study supports more critical accounts of participation by recognising that such spaces are not inherently egalitarian. Participatory processes were shaped by facilitation, confidence, and implicit norms, suggesting that they should be understood as situated and negotiated rather than idealised democratic spaces. Their value lies in enabling the articulation of tension, not in resolving it.

The ecology metaphor is particularly useful because it foregrounds the interdependence between relational, institutional, dialogical, and affective conditions of professional learning rather than treating learning as participation within a single bounded community of practice. In this sense, participatory inquiry functioned not only as a shared professional space, but as a dynamic relational infrastructure through which democratic pedagogical work could be interpreted, sustained, and negotiated across multiple contexts.

5.4. Institutional Conditions, Legitimacy, and the Limits of Democratic Becoming

The findings reinforce the importance of institutional conditions in shaping democratic pedagogy. Across both the Portuguese and Croatian cases, tensions between participatory pedagogical practices and institutional expectations concerning accountability, predictability, efficiency, and measurable performance were consistently evident. This aligns with research on performativity and governance in education (Ball, 2003; Perryman, 2009), as well as more recent work suggesting that accountability cultures may narrow pedagogical possibility by privileging measurable outcomes over dialogical, participatory, and relational forms of learning (Keddie et al., 2021; Mockler, 2022a). The findings here suggest that democratic pedagogy becomes particularly vulnerable under such conditions because its value is often less immediately recognisable within dominant evaluative frameworks.

At the same time, the study shows that democratic pedagogy cannot be understood solely at the level of classroom method or teacher disposition. Rather, democratic practice emerged as institutionally contingent, shaped by organisational cultures, leadership practices, professional norms, and broader policy environments that influenced whether participatory approaches were perceived as legitimate, marginal, or professionally risky. Teachers' accounts suggest that democratic engagement became more sustainable where institutional cultures supported dialogue, shared responsibility, and pedagogical experimentation, and more fragile where democratic openness was interpreted as inefficiency, loss of control, or deviation from expected practice.

The Croatian cases made these tensions especially visible through participants' descriptions of hierarchical structures, uneven participation in decision-making, and limited institutional openness to democratic forms of professional dialogue. In the Portuguese cases, similar tensions appeared through concerns about curriculum pacing, time pressure, and the need to justify aesthetic and embodied pedagogies within dominant understandings of "proper" teaching. Although differently articulated, both contexts indicate that questions of legitimacy are central to whether democratic pedagogy can be sustained in practice.

These findings therefore challenge approaches that treat democratic pedagogy primarily as a matter of individual commitment, pedagogical technique, or normative aspiration. Instead, they suggest that democratic becoming is co-produced through institutional and relational conditions that shape whether democratic practices can become professionally recognisable and sustainable over time. Without organisational cultures that legitimise uncertainty, participation, and collaborative interpretation, democratic pedagogy remains dependent on individual effort rather than embedded within professional practice.

Some differences between the Portuguese and Croatian findings may also reflect not only national or institutional contexts, but differences in the participatory ecologies through which democratic pedagogy was explored and negotiated. This further reinforces the importance of understanding democratic pedagogy as situated within broader professional and organisational environments rather than as a universally transferable pedagogical model.

5.5. Implications for Teacher Education and Professional Learning

These findings have important implications for both research and professional learning. First, they suggest that democratic pedagogy should be studied not only in terms of outcomes or normative commitments, but in relation to the professional risks and institutional conditions that shape its enactment. Second, they indicate that teacher education should move beyond technical models to address the ethical, relational, and political dimensions of democratic practice, including the reality of uncertainty and exposure.

Finally, the study underscores the importance of collective professional spaces in sustaining democratic engagement. Participatory and dialogical forms of professional learning appear particularly significant because they enable teachers to interpret and negotiate the tensions inherent in democratic pedagogy rather than individualising them as personal shortcomings.

Future research would benefit from examining democratic risk longitudinally and across different educational systems in order to better understand how institutional cultures, policy environments, and professional learning structures shape the sustainability of democratic pedagogy over time.

5.6. Limits of the Study

The study should also be read with some caution. Although it draws on all available data from the four selected cases and develops a cross-case interpretation, it does not aim to produce a statistically generalisable account of Early Years and Primary Education. The Croatian case reports themselves explicitly note the limitations of case-based inference, including single-institution contexts and the illustrative character of the findings. The value of the study lies instead in its analytical and conceptual contribution: it offers an empirically grounded interpretation of how democratic risk, legitimacy, and agency are negotiated in practice. The inclusion of different professional roles across cases, including pedagogues and psychologists in the Croatian context, may also have shaped how democratic risk was articulated and interpreted within the collaborative inquiry process.

A further limitation is that the article foregrounds teacher professional learning and interpretation. While children's participation appears indirectly in teachers' accounts and in the co-creative orientation of the cases, the present analysis is not based primarily on children's own voices. This means the paper is strongest in explaining democratic pedagogy as professional practice rather than in providing a full account of democratic experience from the perspective of all participants in the educational setting. That boundary should remain explicit.

The composition of the sample also varied across cases, including different professional roles and institutional settings, which should be taken into account when interpreting cross-case patterns.

In addition, the participatory and co-constructive nature of the research means that the data were shaped not only by participants' experiences, but also by the dialogical conditions of the inquiry itself. While this is a strength of the design, it also means that the findings should be understood as contextually produced and analytically transferable rather than directly generalisable to other settings.

6. Conclusions

This article has examined how teachers in Early Years and Primary Education experience and negotiate democratic risk when enacting democratic pedagogy in participatory research contexts in Portugal and Croatia. The findings show that democratic pedagogy is not experienced as a stable or easily transferable set of methods, but as a situated professional practice shaped by uncertainty, institutional conditions, relational dynamics, and the ongoing need for judgement. Across the four cases, teachers described democratic work as meaningful and professionally generative, yet also as exposing them to unpredictability, vulnerability, and questions of legitimacy.

A first contribution of the article is therefore to develop democratic risk as an empirically grounded analytic lens. The study shows that this risk is not incidental to democratic pedagogy but constitutive of it. Teachers encountered risk pedagogically, in the open-endedness of participatory and embodied work; professionally, in the fear of being judged or misunderstood; relationally, in the negotiation of voice, authority, and responsibility; and institutionally, in contexts where democratic commitments were not always recognised or supported.

A second contribution lies in showing that teacher agency in democratic pedagogy is not best understood as autonomy alone. Rather, agency emerged as relational, negotiated, and ecologically achieved. Teachers acted through interpretation, adaptation, and collective reflection, assessing what was possible within curricular pressures, leadership structures, collegial cultures, and broader institutional expectations. The study therefore reinforces the view that democratic agency depends not only on individual commitment, but on the professional and organisational conditions in which teachers work.

A third contribution is to show that participatory research can function as a professional learning ecology. In both Portugal and Croatia, participatory inquiry created conditions in which teachers could test ideas, articulate uncertainty, compare experiences, and collectively interpret the tensions of practice. These processes did not remove democratic risk, but they made it more visible, more discussable, and more professionally sustainable. In this sense, participatory research supported agency not by offering certainty, but by legitimising reflection, experimentation, and shared meaning-making.

Taken together, the findings show that democratic pedagogy should not be understood only in terms of ideals, methods, or intended outcomes. It must also be understood through the professional conditions under which teachers attempt to enact it. If democratic education is to become more sustainable in Early Years and Primary Education, attention must be given not only to pedagogical resources, but also to the organisational cultures, leadership practices, and professional learning environments that shape whether democratic work can be recognised as legitimate and worthwhile.

The article does not claim generalisability beyond the selected cases. Its value lies instead in offering a conceptually and empirically grounded account of how democratic pedagogy is lived, negotiated, and sustained by teachers working under real institutional conditions. By bringing together democratic risk, teacher agency, and participatory research, the study contributes to a more nuanced and empirically grounded understanding of what democratic pedagogy demands in practice.

In this respect, the study also contributes to strengthening attention to Early Years education within research on democratic pedagogy, showing that democratic practice in early educational phases demands careful attention to relational, institutional, and professional conditions rather than being treated as a simplified or naturally democratic domain.

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