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Ireland

*CORRESPONDENCE

Claudia Neves
✉ claudia.neves@uab.pt

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Democracy-as-becoming in early years and primary education: aesthetic, embodied, and digital pedagogical ecologies

Claudia Neves^{1*}, Monika Pažur², Juliana Oliveira¹,
Pedro Abrantes¹, Marta Abelha¹, Ana Patrícia Almeida¹ and
Katarina Aladrović Slovaček²

¹Laboratório de Educação a Distância e eLearning, Universidade Aberta, Lisbon, Portugal, ²Faculty of Teacher Education, University of Zagreb, Zagreb, Croatia

In a context of growing democratic fragility, education is increasingly called upon to cultivate democratic participation, relational responsibility, and civic engagement. However, dominant approaches to education for democracy continue to privilege cognitive knowledge and procedural participation, often overlooking the embodied, affective, and relational dimensions through which democracy is first encountered and lived. This paper advances the concept of democracy-as-becoming to examine democratic learning in Early Years and Primary Education, where democratic relations are enacted through everyday pedagogical encounters rather than transmitted as abstract knowledge. The study draws on a transnational Participatory Action Research (PAR) programme conducted within the Aesthetic and Embodied Learning for Democracy-as-Becoming (AECED) project across multiple European contexts. Focusing on four cases in Portugal and Croatia, the paper presents a cross-case analytical synthesis of professional learning processes in which educators participated as co-researchers. These cases combined aesthetic, embodied, narrative, and digital pedagogical practices across online and face-to-face professional learning environments. Data included reflective writings, online discussions, observation notes, and visual and narrative artefacts generated through iterative PAR cycles. The analysis identifies three interrelated pedagogical ecologies—embodied, aesthetic–narrative, and digital/hybrid—through which democratic becoming is enabled, negotiated, and constrained. Across these ecologies, democratic learning emerged through relational grounding, co-creation, and embodied participation, while also being shaped by institutional conditions and perceptions of pedagogical risk. The paper contributes a data-informed conceptual model of democratic becoming grounded in cross-case analysis, highlighting how democratic sensibility develops through the interaction of relational, embodied, professional, and institutional dimensions. It concludes by discussing implications for teacher education, curriculum design, and research on democratic education, emphasising the need to recognise aesthetic and embodied pedagogies as core infrastructures of democratic life.

KEYWORDS

democratic education, early childhood education, embodied learning, participatory action research, primary education, teacher professional learning

1 Introduction

Across Europe and beyond, democracy is increasingly experienced as fragile, procedural, and unevenly lived. Declining trust in institutions, political polarisation, and growing social fragmentation have intensified calls for education systems to play a more active role in sustaining democratic cultures. In response, education for democracy has gained renewed prominence in policy frameworks, curricular reforms, and international agendas. Yet, despite this renewed attention, democratic education continues to be framed predominantly in cognitive and procedural terms, often emphasising knowledge, competencies, and formal participation over the lived, relational, and affective dimensions of democratic life.

Such approaches remain important, but they risk overlooking a foundational question: how democracy is first encountered, felt, and enacted in educational experience. This question is particularly significant in Early Years and Primary Education, where children's understandings of democracy do not begin with abstract political concepts or institutional knowledge. Rather, they emerge through everyday experiences of voice and silence, inclusion and exclusion, authority and negotiation, responsiveness and disregard. Long before children can name democratic principles, they encounter the conditions through which democratic life becomes meaningful or fragile.

This paper argues that Early Years and Primary Education should not be understood as merely preparatory stages for future democratic citizenship, but as educational spaces in which democracy is already being lived, negotiated, and learned. In these settings, democracy is not only a topic to be taught; it is a way of relating, participating, and making meaning with others. Everyday pedagogical encounters—how children are listened to, how differences are responded to, how shared decisions are made, and how conflict is addressed—form part of the democratic texture of educational life.

To examine this process, the paper adopts the concept of democracy-as-becoming. This perspective understands democracy not as a fixed system, stable endpoint, or discrete set of competencies, but as a relational and unfinished process that is continually enacted through interaction, attentiveness, and shared practice. From this standpoint, democracy is not something for which children are simply prepared in the future; it is something they already participate in, however partially and unevenly, in the present. The concept offers a way of understanding democratic learning as emergent, embodied, and situated within everyday pedagogical life rather than external to it.

This argument is especially relevant in early education, where learning is deeply embodied, affective, and relational. Young children engage with the world through movement, play, imagination, sensory experience, and interaction with others. Their participation in democratic life is therefore shaped not only through verbal discussion or explicit instruction, but through bodily presence, shared rhythms, creative activity, and the pedagogical environments in which they are invited—or not invited—to contribute. For this reason, aesthetic and embodied pedagogies are particularly significant for democratic education in early childhood and primary contexts. They make it possible to explore democracy through experience, relation, and co-creation, rather than solely through explanation.

The paper draws on a transnational Participatory Action Research (PAR) programme developed within the AECED project, which explored how aesthetic and embodied learning can support education for democracy across different educational phases and European contexts. More specifically, this article focuses on four Early Years and Primary Education cases in Portugal and Croatia, where educators engaged as co-researchers in professional learning processes using visual, narrative, embodied, and digital pedagogical practices. Rather than offering separate case descriptions, the paper presents a cross-case analytical synthesis that identifies recurring pedagogical patterns, enabling conditions, and tensions across these cases.

The study asks: How is democratic becoming enabled, negotiated, and constrained in Early Years and Primary Education?

In response to this question, the paper identifies three interrelated pedagogical ecologies: embodied classroom ecologies, aesthetic–narrative ecologies, and digital and hybrid ecologies. It argues that these ecologies help illuminate how democratic learning is shaped not only by pedagogical methods, but by the relationships, material arrangements, institutional conditions, and professional judgements through which educational experience unfolds. Across the cases, democratic becoming emerged through relational grounding, co-creation, attentiveness to others, and embodied participation, while also being shaped by institutional constraints, pedagogical risk, and uneven legitimisation of democratic practice.

The paper contributes to scholarship on democratic education in three ways. First, it develops democracy-as-becoming as a conceptual lens for understanding democratic learning in early education. Second, it offers an empirically grounded cross-case analysis of aesthetic, embodied, and digital pedagogical practices in teacher professional learning. Third, it proposes a conceptual model of democratic becoming in early educational ecologies that connects relational, embodied, professional, and institutional dimensions of pedagogy.

The article proceeds as follows. Section 2 outlines the theoretical framework on democracy-as-becoming, aesthetic and embodied pedagogy, and democratic learning in early education. Section 3 presents the methodological design and cross-case analytical approach. Section 4 examines the three pedagogical ecologies identified across the cases. Section 5 synthesises the cross-case conditions shaping democratic becoming and proposes a conceptual model. Section 6 discusses implications for teacher education, curriculum, policy, and research.

2 Theoretical framework: democracy-as-becoming, democratic pedagogy, and early educational ecologies

Democratic education in early childhood and primary contexts cannot be understood adequately through frameworks that treat democracy primarily as civic knowledge, procedural participation, or the acquisition of individual competencies. While such approaches remain important, they risk narrowing democracy to what can be explicitly taught, formally assessed, or articulated propositionally. This paper starts from a different

premise: that democracy is also lived through relationships, sensibilities, embodied participation, and everyday pedagogical arrangements. In this sense, democratic learning in Early Years and Primary Education is encountered through everyday experiences of inclusion, voice, care, and shared participation rather than through abstract principles alone.

2.1 Democracy-as-becoming

The concept of democracy-as-becoming provides the central analytical lens for this paper. Rather than understanding democracy as a fixed institutional form or a stable endpoint, democracy-as-becoming conceptualises democracy as an unfinished, relational, and emergent process. In educational settings, this means that democracy is not something learners merely prepare for in the future; it is something enacted, negotiated, and experienced in the present through pedagogical life.

This perspective builds on relational and process-oriented approaches to democracy and education (Biesta, 2011; Moss, 2014). This perspective also aligns with more recent work emphasising democracy as an ongoing, relational, and open-ended process rather than a fixed institutional form (Biesta, 2020).

This perspective is especially significant in Early Years and Primary Education. In these phases, democratic life is encountered not through constitutional language or formal deliberation, but through how children are recognised, listened to, responded to, and included in everyday activity. Educational spaces such as classrooms, playgrounds, workshops, and digital learning environments function as small democratic publics in which children and adults negotiate rules, meanings, responsibilities, and relationships. Early education is therefore treated here as a foundational democratic site rather than a merely preparatory one.

Democracy-as-becoming also shifts attention from democracy as content to democracy as a mode of relating. It foregrounds participation, responsiveness, care, equality, and openness to difference as qualities that emerge through interaction rather than transmission. This perspective aligns with sociocultural and relational views of learning, which understand participation and meaning as co-constructed through engagement with others. Within the wider AECED research programme, democracy was similarly treated as relational, emergent, and future-oriented, and the project's methodological framework explicitly aligned this understanding with participatory, co-creative inquiry and with aesthetic and embodied learning as activating resources for democracy.

2.2 Democratic pedagogy in early childhood and primary education

If democracy is understood as becoming, then democratic education must be approached pedagogically rather than only curricularly. Democratic pedagogy refers here to forms of educational practice that cultivate participation, relational responsibility, shared meaning-making, and ethical responsiveness in the everyday life of learning. In early childhood and primary education, this is expressed not only through formal structures of participation, but through the lived

pedagogical relationship between adults and children: how choices are opened or constrained, how dialogue is facilitated, how difference is engaged, and how power is negotiated in practice.

Democratic pedagogy has been widely discussed in relation to participation, agency, and relational learning (Biesta, 2017; Dahlberg et al., 2007). However, this requires moving beyond thin understandings of participation. Participation is not simply a matter of giving children opportunities to speak; it also concerns whether their expressions, gestures, silences, ideas, and ways of being are recognised as meaningful within the pedagogical encounter. In this sense, democratic pedagogy in early education must be understood as multimodal, relational, and developmentally situated. Children's democratic agency is enacted not only through verbal language, but through play, movement, imagination, affect, and symbolic expression.

Recent peer-reviewed research in early childhood education also shows that democratic pedagogy is enacted in the micro-everyday life of educational settings, where participation depends on how adults and children negotiate routine practices, voice, and shared meaning-making rather than only on formal structures of inclusion (Whittington et al., 2024). Children's own accounts of school democracy similarly suggest that participation is often shaped by adult control, discontinuities in practice, and the suppression or marginalisation of children's voices in everyday school life (Thornberg and Elvstrand, 2012).

Within this perspective, teacher agency and child agency are not competing but interdependent. Teachers shape the conditions under which democratic participation becomes possible, while children contribute actively to the co-construction of pedagogical life. Power-sharing in early education is therefore neither symmetrical nor absent; rather, it is negotiated within age-related and institutional asymmetries, while remaining meaningful and pedagogically consequential.

This understanding resonates with perspectives that challenge hierarchical distributions of knowledge and authority in education, emphasising equality as a starting point rather than an outcome (Rancière, 1991). It also aligns with participatory approaches in early childhood education that foreground listening, multimodal expression, and children's perspectives (Clark, 2010).

From this perspective, democratic pedagogy can be understood through four interrelated principles. First, it is grounded relationally, through trust, care, recognition, and a sense of belonging. Second, it involves shared meaning-making, understood as the co-construction of interpretations, activities, and decisions. Third, it requires responsiveness to difference, treating plurality, uncertainty, and disagreement as integral to democratic life rather than as disruption. Fourth, it depends on ethical attentiveness, expressed through the capacity to notice, pause, listen, and respond without reducing the other to pre-existing categories.

2.3 Aesthetic and embodied pedagogy as democratic pedagogy

Aesthetic and embodied pedagogies are central to this paper because they make democratic life perceptible, experienceable,

and shareable in ways that exceed cognitive or verbal instruction alone. Aesthetic experiences such as storytelling, drawing, movement, music, and visual exploration allow democratic values to be encountered through feeling, sensing, and acting together, while embodied learning highlights how posture, gesture, rhythm, proximity, and movement communicate authority, inclusion, and responsiveness.

Within the AECED methodological framework, arts-based and embodied pedagogies were explicitly defined as methods that work with feelings, emotions, senses, narrative, and the body, including storytelling, photography, drawing, dance, movement, sensory approaches, drama, and creative writing. These were not treated as decorative additions but as core pedagogical resources for exploring democratic relations.

The democratic significance of these pedagogies lies in three main features. First, they broaden the forms through which participation can occur. Aesthetic and embodied activity allows children and adults to engage through image, gesture, movement, tone, rhythm, and symbol, rather than relying exclusively on formal speech or written language. This is particularly important in early childhood and primary contexts, where communication is inherently multimodal.

Second, these pedagogies make relational and ethical dimensions of democracy more visible. Through collective movement, storytelling, dramatic enactment, or collaborative image-making, participants encounter interdependence, vulnerability, perspective-taking, and the effects of their actions on others. Democracy becomes something felt in relation, not merely named in principle.

Third, aesthetic and embodied pedagogies create conditions for co-creation. They often disrupt transmission-oriented models of teaching by opening space for improvisation, interpretation, experimentation, and shared authorship. In this sense, they are not only methods for teaching democracy; they are themselves democratic forms of pedagogy when organised around attentiveness, inclusion, and mutual responsiveness. These insights are also consistent with wider work on arts-based and embodied learning that emphasises affect, sensory engagement, and aesthetic experience as central to meaning-making and relational understanding, including recent AECED work on the aesthetic-embodied dimension in learning for democracy (Jääskeläinen et al., 2025).

These perspectives align with work on embodied cognition and aesthetic experience in learning (Gallagher, 2005; Shusterman, 2008).

2.4 Professional learning, co-research, and democratic becoming

This paper focuses not directly on children's classroom participation alone, but on teachers' professional learning for democratic practice. Democratic pedagogy in early education depends not only on curricular ideals, but on whether educators themselves have opportunities to experience, interpret, and experiment with democratic ways of learning. Teacher professional learning is therefore not peripheral to democratic education; rather, it constitutes one of its central conditions of possibility.

Within the AECED project, teachers were positioned as co-researchers within a Participatory Action Research (PAR) framework, engaging in iterative cycles of reflection, planning, action, and analysis. PAR was used not only as a method for data

generation, but as a participatory and co-creative process through which educators developed, trialled, analysed, and evaluated pedagogical practices in relation to democracy. In this sense, the research process itself became a site of professional learning.

Participatory Action Research is grounded in traditions of collaborative inquiry and reflective practice (Schön, 1983; Wenger, 1998). This grounding is theoretically significant because it aligns method and object. If democracy-as-becoming is relational, dialogical, and emergent, then research and professional learning on democratic education must also take relational, dialogical, and emergent forms. PAR supports this alignment by positioning educators as knowledge-makers rather than passive recipients of innovation.

This perspective also helps explain the analytical focus of the paper on pedagogical ecologies rather than isolated techniques. What matters is not only which activities are used, but how relations, meanings, risks, and possibilities are configured across a wider learning environment. In this respect, the study connects with participatory approaches in early childhood education that emphasise listening, multimodal expression, and children's perspectives (Clark, 2010).

2.5 Digital and hybrid pedagogical ecologies

Digitality is not treated here as a separate or secondary issue, but as an integral part of the pedagogical ecology within which democratic practice increasingly unfolds. Digital and hybrid environments reshape how participation, presence, listening, and co-creation are enacted. They can widen access, extend opportunities for reflection over time, and support collaborative meaning-making through asynchronous dialogue and shared artefacts. At the same time, they may reduce sensory and relational cues, intensify inequalities of participation, and make sustained attentiveness more difficult to maintain.

Peer-reviewed research on participatory digital learning suggests that digitally mediated pedagogies can extend reflection, collaboration, and distributed participation, but they also intensify questions of digital inequality, blurred boundaries, and the design of participatory learning environments (Jarkiewicz and Krawczyk-Pojda, 2025). This supports the argument that democratic pedagogy in digital and hybrid contexts cannot be reduced to technological delivery, but depends on how voice, collaboration, and relational attentiveness are intentionally structured across mediated spaces.

The AECED case material reflects these dynamics. In the Portuguese cases, online learning environments combined synchronous and asynchronous activities, enabling extended dialogue, reflection, and collaborative exchange. At the same time, transnational analysis across cases identified recurring themes such as co-creation, engagement, curiosity, the importance of safe spaces, and the persistence of institutional constraints, including in hybrid and mediated forms of participation.

For this reason, democratic pedagogy in digital and hybrid contexts cannot be reduced to questions of technological delivery. It requires intentional pedagogical design oriented toward voice, listening, care, and collaborative authorship across mediated spaces. These dynamics resonate with perspectives on

networked and distributed learning (Siemens, 2005), which emphasise the relational and connective nature of knowledge production in contemporary educational environments.

2.6 Pedagogical ecologies as the unit of analysis

The concept of pedagogical ecologies integrates the strands developed above, allowing the analysis to move beyond discrete methods toward an understanding of the interdependence of bodies, spaces, materials, technologies, relationships, institutional norms, and professional agency. Pedagogical ecologies are understood as dynamic configurations through which democratic becoming is enabled, constrained, negotiated, and continually reconfigured.

This ecological lens is particularly relevant in early childhood and primary education, where democratic life is rarely located within a single activity. Rather, it emerges through the interaction of embodied experience, aesthetic mediation, narrative meaning-making, professional judgement, institutional culture, and digital mediation. In this sense, democratic pedagogy is not reducible to isolated practices but must be understood as situated within complex and evolving pedagogical environments.

This perspective is supported by sociocultural approaches to learning and participation (Wenger, 1998), as well as by more recent work emphasising the interconnected nature of democratic practices across institutional, relational, and pedagogical dimensions (Woods, 2024). Within the AECED project, this perspective has been further developed, with recent analyses highlighting how democratic practices emerge through the interaction of multiple pedagogical ecologies rather than through isolated interventions (Woods and Pažur, 2025). Together, these perspectives reinforce the view that democratic becoming is shaped through relational and ecological processes rather than linear or procedural ones.

From this standpoint, the findings that follow examine three interrelated pedagogical ecologies of democratic becoming in Early Years and Primary Education: embodied classroom ecologies, aesthetic–narrative ecologies, and digital and hybrid ecologies. These are not treated as fixed categories imposed in advance, but as analytical patterns that emerged through cross-case synthesis of the empirical material.

This is consistent with recent research arguing that democratic pedagogies in early childhood are shaped by routine interactions, professional identities, and the extent to which everyday settings enable multiple perspectives to be brought into dialogue (Whittington et al., 2024). From this standpoint, the findings that follow examine how these dynamics are enacted across different pedagogical ecologies.

3 Methodology: transnational participatory action research and cross-case analysis

This study is situated within the Aesthetic and Embodied Learning for Democracy (AELD) strand of the AECED project,

a European research initiative exploring how democracy can be cultivated through aesthetic, embodied, relational, and participatory pedagogies across diverse educational settings. The wider project adopted a Participatory Action Research (PAR) methodology across six partner countries and nineteen cases, spanning early years and primary, secondary, higher education, and adult/professional learning. The six PAR phases were: introduction, familiarisation, collaborative reflection, planning, action, and analysis and synthesis.

This article focuses on four Early Years and Primary Education cases from Portugal and Croatia. Rather than reporting each case separately, it develops a cross-case analytical synthesis of how democratic becoming was enabled, negotiated, and constrained through aesthetic, embodied, narrative, and digital pedagogical practices in teachers' professional learning.

3.1 Research design

The study draws on PAR as both a research methodology and a democratic mode of inquiry. Within the AECED methodological framework, PAR was used to support iterative cycles of designing, trialling, reflecting, analysing, and re-designing pedagogical practice. Researchers were not positioned as distant observers. Instead, the project treated educators as participants in collaborative inquiry, consistent with the project's broader understanding of democracy-as-becoming as relational, co-creative, and emergent.

Across the wider project, all national teams designed and conducted their own case research using a shared methodological framework and common research questions. This allowed contextual adaptation while also creating sufficient comparability for later cross-case analysis. The project documentation makes clear that the intention was not to standardise practice rigidly, but to enable meaningful analytical synthesis across diverse settings.

3.2 Case selection and focus of this paper

This paper concentrates on four cases located in the Early Years and Primary Education phase, specifically in Portugal and Croatia. These cases were selected because they offered rich material for examining democratic pedagogy in teacher professional learning and because they included contrasting yet complementary pedagogical environments.

In Portugal, the cases were developed through an approximately 50-hour online professional learning course, combining synchronous sessions and asynchronous activities structured around PAR phases. In Croatia, the cases were organised through face-to-face workshops using storytelling, movement, drama, and reflective dialogue. This contrast between online and in-person professional learning made it possible to examine democratic becoming across both embodied co-present and digitally mediated pedagogical environments.

Participants included early years and primary educators and, in some Croatian cases, other school-based professionals such as pedagogues and psychologists. Across the cases, educators were engaged not simply as attendees in training, but as co-

researchers who reflected on practice, trialled activities, generated artefacts, and contributed to collective meaning-making about democracy, pedagogy, and participation. This participatory role is consistent with the wider AECED case design, in which educators were expected to co-create, trial, analyse, and evaluate the Framework and Guides in practice.

3.3 Data generation

The empirical material used in this article was generated through multimodal and participatory processes. Across the Portuguese and Croatian cases, the data included reflective writings and post-activity reflections, online forum discussions, observation notes, visual and narrative artefacts, photographs and videos, and documentation produced during collaborative activities and workshops.

These forms of data are consistent with the wider AECED methodology, which explicitly foregrounds arts-based, embodied, visual, narrative, and sensory approaches as legitimate means of inquiry and pedagogical experimentation. The methodological framework defined aesthetic and embodied learning for democracy as involving a range of activities such as collage creation, photography, drawing, dance, movement, sensory methods, drama, storytelling, and creative writing.

The use of multimodal data was especially important in this study because the paper investigates pedagogies that are themselves embodied, aesthetic, and relational. Restricting the evidence base to conventional textual forms alone would have been insufficient for capturing how democratic learning was experienced and interpreted across the cases.

3.4 Teachers as co-researchers

In this study, that role involved more than participation in workshops or professional development sessions. Teachers contributed to the research by documenting their experiences, reflecting critically on pedagogical activities, generating visual and narrative material, discussing interpretations with peers and facilitators, and helping to shape the ongoing direction of the inquiry.

This role aligns with the AECED understanding of PAR, in which research participants are engaged in iterative processes of reflection and transformation rather than merely observed from outside. In practical terms, teachers' reflections, forum exchanges, artefacts, and responses to activities became part of the empirical material from which the cross-case analysis was developed. Their participation, therefore, informed both the pedagogical process and the analytical interpretation of democratic becoming.

3.5 Data analysis

Data analysis followed an iterative process moving between within-case interpretation and cross-case synthesis. At the case level, national teams analysed their own material in relation to the common AECED research questions, including questions

about participants' experiences of the Framework and Guides, the co-creation of aesthetic and embodied learning for democracy, participant transformation, researcher influence, and implications for refining the project's pedagogical resources.

For cross-case work, the AECED project developed a Shared Memoing Matrix, which served as a common analytical infrastructure across all nineteen cases. This matrix organised memoing across six PAR phases and four dimensions: descriptive, reflective, conceptual, and theoretical. It was designed specifically to support comparison across cases, countries, and educational phases while preserving transparency and contextual nuance.

The analysis for this article proceeded in four stages.

First, relevant Portuguese and Croatian case materials were revisited in relation to the paper's focus on Early Years and Primary Education.

Second, descriptive and reflective accounts were examined for recurring patterns in how democratic participation, voice, co-creation, attentiveness, and pedagogical risk were experienced.

Third, these recurring patterns were clustered into broader pedagogical ecologies: embodied classroom ecologies, aesthetic-narrative ecologies, and digital/hybrid ecologies.

Fourth, a higher-level synthesis identified cross-cutting conditions shaping democratic becoming across these ecologies, including relational grounding, democratic risk and legitimacy, teacher agency and co-creation, and institutional openness and constraint.

This approach is consistent with qualitative thematic and interpretive analysis in participatory research (Braun and Clarke, 2006).

The categories used in the findings are therefore not presented as fixed or pre-given typologies. Rather, they are analytical constructs developed through iterative interpretation of empirical material across cases, informed by the wider AECED conceptual work but grounded in the patterns that emerged from the case evidence.

3.6 Ethics and trustworthiness

All cases were conducted under national and institutional ethical procedures, including informed consent, anonymisation, and GDPR-compliant handling of data. Ethical considerations were built into both the case design and the reporting process across WP4.

Trustworthiness was strengthened through methodological triangulation, the use of multiple data forms, collaborative reflection within PAR cycles, and cross-national dialogue within the consortium. The iterative structure of the wider project also supported credibility: case design, trialling, data analysis, memoing, and cross-case synthesis were connected through successive deliverables and collective review processes rather than treated as isolated stages. The Shared Memoing Matrix was used by the research teams across participating countries to support cross-case analysis and comparative interpretation; teachers did not access the matrix directly.

3.7 Scope and limitations of the article

This article does not aim to provide a full comparative account of all national contexts in the AECED project, nor does it

reproduce the full detail of each case report. Its purpose is narrower: to develop an empirically grounded cross-case interpretation of pedagogical ecologies of democratic becoming in Early Years and Primary Education using the Portuguese and Croatian cases as the primary analytical basis.

4 Pedagogical ecologies of democratic becoming in early education

Understanding democracy-as-becoming in Early Years and Primary Education requires moving beyond individual pedagogical methods to examine the ecologies within which democratic relations are enacted. Pedagogical ecologies are understood here as dynamic configurations of bodies, spaces, materials, technologies, relationships, and institutional conditions that shape how participation, meaning-making, and shared responsibility emerge in practice.

Drawing on cross-case analysis of the Portuguese and Croatian cases, this section identifies three interrelated pedagogical ecologies through which democratic becoming was enabled, negotiated, and constrained: embodied classroom ecologies, aesthetic–narrative ecologies, and digital and hybrid ecologies.

These ecologies are not discrete domains but overlapping and interacting conditions of practice. The analysis that follows integrates empirical material from the cases to illustrate how democratic participation was experienced and interpreted across different pedagogical settings.

4.1 Embodied classroom ecologies: democracy through presence and movement

Embodied classroom ecologies foreground the role of bodily presence, movement, gesture, and spatial interaction in shaping democratic relations. Across the cases analysed, embodiment was not simply an instructional technique but a fundamental condition through which participation, responsiveness, and relational awareness were enacted.

In the Croatian cases, face-to-face workshops made extensive use of embodied and arts-based practices, including movement exercises, role-play, and dramatic improvisation. In one sequence, participants were invited to respond physically to others' movements without verbal instruction, creating a shared space of interaction based on attentiveness, timing, and mutual adjustment. Teachers described how such activities shifted attention away from correct answers or predefined outcomes toward relational coordination and responsiveness. One participant reflected that the exercise revealed how some people were immediately responded to while others remained unnoticed, prompting discussion about similar dynamics of inclusion and exclusion in classroom participation. Participation thus became visible not through speech alone, but through gesture, proximity, rhythm, and bodily orientation.

These embodied interactions also disrupted conventional hierarchies of voice. Teachers observed that participants who were less confident in verbal discussion engaged more actively

through movement and non-verbal expression. In this sense, embodiment expanded the conditions of participation, allowing multiple forms of expression to count as meaningful contributions.

In the Portuguese cases, which were conducted primarily online, embodied experience was engaged differently but remained present. Participants were invited to reflect on bodily and emotional responses to pedagogical situations, to map feelings visually, and to share sensory impressions in asynchronous discussions. While these practices lacked the immediacy of co-present interaction, they still foregrounded the body as a site of knowing and ethical relation. Teachers reported that these activities supported deeper awareness of how classroom situations are experienced not only cognitively but affectively and physically.

Across both contexts, three cross-case patterns emerged.

First, embodied practices supported non-verbal and multimodal participation, broadening access to democratic engagement beyond linguistic competence.

Second, they cultivated relational attentiveness, as participants became more aware of others' presence, responses, and needs. This attentiveness was often described as a precondition for meaningful participation.

Third, they enabled shared experiential learning, in which teachers and participants engaged together in activities that softened traditional teacher–learner hierarchies and supported more horizontal forms of interaction.

At the same time, embodied ecologies were shaped by institutional constraints. Teachers reported that open-ended movement-based activities were often difficult to sustain within time-structured curricula and accountability-driven environments. Concerns about classroom control, productivity, and legitimacy sometimes limited the integration of embodied approaches into everyday practice.

These findings suggest that embodied classroom ecologies function as both enabling and constrained spaces for democratic becoming. While they create conditions for inclusion, responsiveness, and shared participation, their sustainability depends on how far institutional contexts legitimise embodied forms of learning.

4.2 Aesthetic–narrative ecologies: imagination, meaning-making, and voice

Aesthetic–narrative ecologies centre on the use of storytelling, visual representation, creative expression, and symbolic exploration to support democratic meaning-making. Across the cases, these practices played a central role in enabling participants to explore questions of identity, participation, responsibility, and belonging in ways that extended beyond propositional language.

In the Croatian cases, storytelling, drama, and visual methods were used to explore themes such as power, voice, and democratic school culture. Participants engaged in narrative exercises in which they created and shared stories reflecting their experiences of inclusion, exclusion, and participation in educational settings. These stories were then discussed collectively, allowing participants to recognise shared patterns and differences in their experiences.

Teachers reported that narrative and aesthetic practices created a sense of emotional safety, enabling participants to express complex or sensitive experiences indirectly through metaphor, character, or image. This mediated form of expression made it possible to engage with democratic questions without requiring immediate personal disclosure, thereby supporting more inclusive participation.

In the Portuguese cases, aesthetic–narrative work took place largely through digital environments. Participants created visual artefacts, written reflections, and narrative accounts, which were shared and discussed asynchronously in online forums. In one activity, participants were invited to create visual representations of “voice” in their educational settings. These artefacts later became prompts for collective reflection on visible and invisible forms of participation, including who is heard, who is overlooked, and how pedagogical routines shape these dynamics. The asynchronous format allowed time for reflection and supported forms of participation that might not emerge in real-time discussion. Teachers noted that some participants engaged more actively in written and visual forms than in synchronous interaction, highlighting the importance of offering multiple modes of expression.

Across both contexts, aesthetic–narrative ecologies supported democratic becoming in three key ways.

First, they enabled multimodal voice, allowing participants to express ideas, emotions, and experiences through images, stories, and symbols rather than relying solely on verbal argument.

Second, they supported collective meaning-making, as artefacts and narratives became shared reference points for dialogue and interpretation.

Third, they fostered democratic reflexivity, enabling participants to examine assumptions, question norms, and imagine alternative pedagogical possibilities.

These practices also had a significant impact on teachers’ professional learning. Engaging in aesthetic and narrative exploration encouraged teachers to reflect on their own roles, decisions, and assumptions, contributing to a shift from transmission-oriented pedagogy toward more dialogical and participatory approaches.

However, as with embodied practices, aesthetic–narrative ecologies were not fully supported in all contexts. Teachers reported that creative and exploratory work was sometimes perceived as peripheral or non-essential within institutional cultures focused on measurable outcomes. This perception could limit both the time allocated to such practices and teachers’ willingness to experiment with them.

Overall, aesthetic–narrative ecologies functioned as important mediating spaces in which democratic meaning could be explored, negotiated, and re-imagined collectively.

4.3 Digital and hybrid ecologies: mediated participation and democratic risk

Digital and hybrid pedagogical ecologies introduced distinct possibilities and challenges for democratic participation. Across the cases, digital environments were not simply channels for delivering content, but spaces in which participation, reflection, and co-creation were reconfigured.

In the Portuguese cases, the online professional learning course combined synchronous sessions with asynchronous forum discussions. Asynchronous communication played a particularly important role in supporting reflective participation, allowing participants time to formulate responses, revisit ideas, and engage with others’ contributions. Shared digital artefacts—including written reflections and visual outputs—became focal points for collective meaning-making. In several instances, participants returned to earlier forum contributions over several days, deepening the dialogue in ways that would not have been possible within a single live session.

Teachers reported that digital environments enabled forms of participation that might not emerge in face-to-face settings, particularly for participants who preferred time for reflection or were less comfortable speaking in groups. In this sense, digital ecologies expanded access to participation and supported more distributed forms of dialogue.

In the Croatian cases, although primarily face-to-face, elements of digital reflection and documentation were incorporated into the learning process. This created hybrid spaces in which embodied interaction and reflective documentation complemented each other.

Across both contexts, hybrid configurations proved particularly generative. Face-to-face interaction supported trust-building and relational grounding, while digital environments enabled ongoing reflection and collaborative interpretation. This combination allowed participants to revisit experiences, deepen analysis, and sustain dialogue beyond immediate interaction.

However, digital ecologies also introduced specific challenges.

First, the absence of physical co-presence reduced sensory and relational cues, making it more difficult to interpret tone, emotion, and intention.

Second, participation became more uneven, with some participants engaging actively while others remained peripheral.

Third, digital environments required more deliberate facilitation to sustain attentiveness, inclusion, and care, particularly in asynchronous settings where disengagement could remain unnoticed.

Teachers described these challenges as forms of democratic risk: the possibility that participation becomes superficial, fragmented, or instrumental if relational dimensions are not actively cultivated.

These findings suggest that democratic becoming in digital and hybrid ecologies is not diminished, but reconfigured. It depends less on physical proximity and more on intentional pedagogical design, including how voice, listening, responsiveness, and co-creation are structured across mediated environments.

5 Cross-case analytical synthesis: conditions of democratic becoming in early education

Cross-case analysis was guided by the concept of democratic sensibility, understood as a developing capacity for attentiveness, ethical responsiveness, relational awareness, and shared responsibility that emerges through participation in pedagogical practice. Rather than treating the three pedagogical ecologies

(embodied, aesthetic–narrative, and digital/hybrid) as separate domains, the analysis revealed a set of cross-cutting conditions shaping democratic becoming across contexts.

These conditions emerged inductively from the analysis of the Portuguese and Croatian cases and were further interpreted in relation to the theoretical framework. Four interrelated dimensions were identified: relational grounding, democratic risk and legitimacy, teacher and child agency and co-creation, and institutional openness and constraint.

5.1 Relational grounding: democracy as lived interdependence

Across all cases, democratic becoming was consistently grounded in the quality of relationships rather than in formal structures of participation. Democracy emerged through everyday interactions characterised by attentiveness, responsiveness, and shared responsibility.

In both Croatian face-to-face workshops and Portuguese online environments, participants described how trust, care, and recognition enabled more open forms of participation. Embodied activities (e.g., movement-based interaction) and aesthetic–narrative practices (e.g., storytelling and visual artefacts) supported relational attunement by making participants more aware of others' presence, perspectives, and emotional responses.

Relational grounding was not limited to teacher–student interaction but also shaped peer relationships among educators in professional learning contexts. Teachers reported that opportunities to share experiences, reflect collectively, and engage in co-creation contributed to a sense of mutual recognition and professional solidarity.

Importantly, relational grounding functioned as a precondition for democratic participation. Where trust and belonging were present, participants were more willing to engage in dialogue, negotiate difference, and take pedagogical risks. Where relational conditions were weaker—due to time pressure, institutional constraints, or fragmented interaction—democratic participation tended to become more procedural or limited.

These findings indicate that democracy in early education is first experienced as relational interdependence, rather than as a set of formal practices or competencies.

5.2 Democratic risk and legitimacy: negotiating uncertainty in practice

A second cross-case condition was the role of risk in democratic pedagogy. Across the cases, teachers described democratic practices—particularly those involving co-creation, open-ended exploration, and embodied or aesthetic activity—as inherently uncertain and difficult to standardise.

In Croatian workshops, teachers reported that movement-based and improvisational activities introduced unpredictability into the learning process, requiring them to relinquish some degree of control. In Portuguese online settings, open-ended reflective discussions and asynchronous exchanges created uncertainty about participation levels and outcomes.

These experiences were often framed in terms of professional risk. Teachers expressed concerns about how such practices might be perceived within institutional contexts that prioritise efficiency, measurable outcomes, and classroom control. Engaging in democratic pedagogy sometimes meant working at the boundaries of what was considered legitimate practice.

At the same time, risk was not experienced solely as a constraint. In contexts where teachers felt supported—for example, within the structured yet flexible environment of the professional learning programme—uncertainty became generative, opening space for creativity, shared responsibility, and deeper engagement.

The analysis suggests that democratic becoming depends not only on pedagogical design, but on how risk is interpreted and legitimised. Where risk is recognised as an inherent dimension of democratic practice, it can enable experimentation and co-creation. Where it is perceived as professional failure or deviation, it can limit the scope of democratic pedagogy.

5.3 Teacher and child agency and co-creation: from implementation to shared authorship

A third cross-case finding concerns the central role of agency and co-creation in democratic becoming. Across the cases, teachers were not simply implementing predefined pedagogical approaches; they were actively shaping, adapting, and co-creating learning processes.

In both Portuguese and Croatian contexts, co-creation emerged as a key mechanism through which democratic participation was enacted. In aesthetic and embodied activities, participants contributed to the direction, meaning, and development of the activity itself. In digital environments, co-creation extended to the collective production and interpretation of artefacts and reflections.

Crucially, co-creation also involved children's agency, even when the primary data in this study comes from teacher professional learning. Teachers reported becoming more attentive to children's perspectives, more willing to adapt activities based on children's responses, and more open to shared decision-making in classroom practice. This shift reflects a move from transmission-oriented pedagogy toward shared authorship of learning.

However, agency was not evenly distributed. It was shaped by institutional conditions, professional confidence, and available time and space for experimentation. In some cases, co-creation remained limited to specific activities rather than becoming a sustained pedagogical orientation.

These findings highlight that democratic becoming depends on the extent to which both teachers and children can act as participants in shaping pedagogical experience, rather than as recipients of predetermined structures.

5.4 Institutional openness and constraint: shaping pedagogical possibilities

The fourth cross-case dimension concerns the influence of institutional conditions on democratic pedagogy. Across the

cases, teachers consistently described tensions between the relational, open-ended nature of democratic practice and institutional expectations related to curriculum, assessment, and accountability.

Institutional openness—including leadership support, flexibility in pedagogical design, and recognition of aesthetic and embodied learning—enabled teachers to experiment with democratic practices and to sustain them over time. In such contexts, uncertainty and co-creation were more easily legitimised.

Conversely, institutional constraints limited the scope of democratic becoming. Time pressures, standardised curricula, and performance-oriented evaluation frameworks often reduced opportunities for open-ended exploration, embodied interaction, and collective reflection. Teachers described needing to adapt or contain democratic practices to align with institutional expectations.

This variability suggests that democratic becoming is not solely a matter of individual teacher commitment or pedagogical choice. It is co-produced by organisational cultures, leadership practices, and policy environments that either enable or constrain democratic work.

These institutional conditions function both as enabling and constraining forces, shaping how far democratic pedagogy can be enacted, sustained, and legitimised in practice.

5.5 From pedagogical ecologies to conditions of democratic becoming

Taken together, these four dimensions—relational grounding, democratic risk, agency and co-creation, and institutional conditions—reveal that democratic becoming is shaped by the interaction between pedagogical practice and context.

The three pedagogical ecologies identified earlier (embodied, aesthetic–narrative, and digital/hybrid) provide the modalities through which democratic participation is enacted, while the cross-case conditions identified here explain why and how these modalities succeed, fail, or remain partial.

Put differently, pedagogical ecologies show where and how democratic participation is enacted, while cross-case conditions explain what makes such participation possible, fragile, or unevenly sustained.

This synthesis forms the basis for the conceptual model presented in the next section. Importantly, the model should be understood not as an abstract theoretical construct, but as a data-informed conceptualisation derived from cross-case analysis of empirical material.

6 A conceptual model of democratic becoming in early educational ecologies

The cross-case analysis presented in this study supports the development of a conceptual model of democratic becoming in Early Years and Primary Education, grounded in empirical evidence from the Portuguese and Croatian cases and interpreted through the theoretical lens of democracy-as-becoming.

Importantly, this model is not proposed as a prescriptive framework or a fixed sequence of stages. Rather, it is a data-informed conceptualisation that synthesises recurring patterns across cases, highlighting how democratic learning emerges through the interaction of pedagogical practices, relational dynamics, and institutional conditions.

6.1 Democratic becoming as an ecological and relational process

The findings show that democratic becoming is not located in isolated pedagogical strategies or specific activities. Instead, it unfolds through pedagogical ecologies—dynamic configurations of bodies, spaces, materials, technologies, relationships, and institutional norms.

Within these ecologies, democratic learning emerges as a relational process, shaped by attentiveness, responsiveness, co-presence, and shared engagement. Embodied, aesthetic–narrative, and digital/hybrid practices do not operate independently; they interact to create conditions in which participation can be broadened, meanings can be co-constructed, and relationships can be reconfigured.

This ecological perspective aligns with broader sociocultural and relational approaches to learning, in which knowledge and participation are understood as situated, distributed, and co-constructed through interaction. It also resonates with democratic education traditions that emphasise lived experience, dialogue, and shared practice as central to democratic life.

6.2 Core dimensions of the model

Building on the cross-case synthesis, the model identifies four interrelated dimensions shaping democratic becoming. Each dimension corresponds to recurring patterns identified across the Portuguese and Croatian cases through cross-case analysis.

6.2.1 Relational grounding

Democratic participation depends on the presence of trust, care, recognition, and belonging. These relational conditions are not secondary but foundational. Without them, participation risks becoming procedural or superficial.

6.2.2 Democratic risk and legitimacy

Democratic pedagogy involves uncertainty, openness, and the possibility of unpredictability. Whether this risk becomes generative or constraining depends on how it is recognised and legitimised within professional and institutional contexts.

6.2.3 Agency and co-creation (teachers and children)

Democratic becoming is sustained when both teachers and children are positioned as participants in shaping pedagogical experience. This involves a shift from transmission toward shared authorship of learning, where meanings, activities, and

decisions are co-constructed. Importantly, in early education, power-sharing does not imply symmetry but negotiated participation within asymmetrical relationships. Children's agency is expressed through multimodal forms of participation—gesture, play, narrative, imagination—and requires pedagogical recognition to become meaningful.

6.2.4 Institutional openness and constraint

Democratic pedagogy is shaped by organisational cultures, policy frameworks, and accountability structures. Institutional openness can enable experimentation, co-creation, and relational work, while restrictive conditions can limit the scope and sustainability of democratic practices.

6.3 Iterative and non-linear dynamics

The model challenges linear and outcome-driven conceptions of learning by presenting democratic becoming as an iterative and non-linear process. Rather than progressing through fixed stages, democratic learning develops through cycles of participation, reflection, disruption, and reconfiguration.

This perspective aligns with emerging critiques of standardised and instrumental approaches to education, which emphasise measurable outcomes over process. It also resonates with recent work highlighting learning as ongoing, relational, and unfinished, where meaning emerges through interaction rather than being predetermined.

Within this model, moments of tension, uncertainty, or disruption are not failures but integral to democratic learning. They create opportunities for rethinking assumptions, negotiating differences, and reconfiguring relationships.

This perspective is also reflected in recent critiques of outcome-driven education, which argue for learning as an open, relational, and ongoing process rather than a predefined sequence of measurable outputs (Stommel, 2022).

6.4 Embodiment, aesthetics, and digital mediation as infrastructures of democratic learning

A key contribution of the model is to position embodied, aesthetic, and digital pedagogies as infrastructures of democratic becoming, rather than as supplementary methods.

Embodied practices enable participation through presence, movement, and non-verbal expression, expanding what counts as voice.

Aesthetic–narrative practices support imagination, reflexivity, and shared meaning-making through symbolic and creative forms.

Digital and hybrid environments reconfigure participation across time and space, enabling reflection and distributed dialogue while requiring intentional design for relational engagement.

Together, these modalities shape how democratic participation is experienced, negotiated, and sustained. They also highlight that democratic learning is not only cognitive but sensory, affective, and mediated.

This aligns with work highlighting the importance of voice, listening, and care in both physical and digital learning environments as foundational to democratic participation (Bali, 2021).

6.5 Implications for research, practice, and policy

The model developed in this study has several implications for research, teacher education, curriculum, and policy.

6.5.1 For research

The findings highlight the need for research approaches capable of capturing the relational, embodied, and multimodal nature of democratic learning. This includes the use of participatory, arts-based, and qualitative methods, as well as cross-case analytical designs that can identify patterns across contexts without reducing complexity. At the same time, the study points to the importance of further research into causal mechanisms and enabling conditions, recognising that democratic becoming is shaped by complex interactions rather than linear cause–effect relationships.

6.5.2 For teacher education and professional learning

Teacher professional learning should create opportunities for educators to experience and experiment with democratic pedagogy, rather than engaging with it only at a conceptual level. Participatory, reflective, and co-creative approaches—such as those used in participatory action research—can support educators in developing the relational and ethical capacities required for democratic practice.

6.5.3 For curriculum and pedagogy

Educational practice should recognise aesthetic and embodied pedagogies as central to democratic learning, particularly in early education contexts where participation is inherently multimodal. This involves creating space for storytelling, movement, creative expression, and collaborative meaning-making as integral components of everyday pedagogical practice.

6.5.4 For policy and institutional design

Policy frameworks and accountability systems should consider how institutional conditions enable or constrain democratic pedagogy. Supporting democratic education requires not only curricular reform but also organisational cultures that value relational work, uncertainty, and co-creation.

7 Concluding remarks

This paper has argued that democratic becoming in Early Years and Primary Education is shaped through the interaction of pedagogical ecologies, relational dynamics, professional agency, and institutional conditions. By grounding this argument in cross-case analysis of a transnational PAR

programme, the study contributes an empirically informed perspective on how democracy can be lived and learned in early educational settings.

Rather than treating democracy as a predefined outcome or a set of competencies to be acquired, the model presented here emphasises democracy as a continuous, relational, and embodied process of becoming. It invites a rethinking of educational practice as a space where democratic life is not only taught, but enacted, negotiated, and re-imagined in everyday pedagogical encounters.

Data availability statement

The datasets presented in this study are available in the B2Share repository at: <https://doi.org/10.23728/b2share.8fq7y-zfv77>, <https://b2share.eudat.eu/records/kyx8-qw751>. Additional materials are available in the Universidade Aberta Open Repository (RCAAP) at: <http://hdl.handle.net/10400.2/21806>, <http://hdl.handle.net/10400.2/21805>, <http://hdl.handle.net/10400.2/21804>, and <http://hdl.handle.net/10400.2/21803>.

Ethics statement

The studies involving humans were approved by the Ethics Committee of Universidade Aberta and the Ethics Committee of the University of Zagreb. The studies were conducted in accordance with the local legislation and institutional requirements. The participants provided their written informed consent to participate in this study. Written informed consent was obtained from the individual(s) for the publication of any potentially identifiable images or data included in this article.

Author contributions

CN: Writing – review & editing, Methodology, Writing – original draft, Conceptualization, Data curation, Formal analysis, Validation, Investigation, Project administration. MP: Writing – review & editing, Investigation, Conceptualization, Methodology, Supervision, Formal analysis. JO: Formal analysis, Writing – review & editing, Investigation. PA: Conceptualization, Writing – review & editing, Investigation. MA: Conceptualization, Investigation, Writing – review & editing. AA: Writing – review & editing, Investigation. KA: Investigation, Writing – review & editing.

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The author(s) declared that this work was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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