AECED
aesthetic and embodied learning for democracy

TRANSNATIONAL CONCLUSIONS

Deliverable 4.5

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Report, by lead partner, of transnational conclusions and evidence-based implications concerning the prototypes

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ABREVIATIONS

ABE	Arts-based and embodied
AECED	Transforming Education for Democracy through Aesthetic and Embodied Learning, Responsive Pedagogies and Democracy-as-becoming
AELD	Aesthetic and Embodied Learning for Democracy
AG	Acceptive Gaze
CCAG	Cross-Case Analysis Group
D1.2	Deliverable 1.2
D3.1	Deliverable 3.1
D3.2	Deliverable 3.2
D4.1	Deliverable 4.1
D4.2	Deliverable 4.2
D4.3	Deliverable 4.3
D4.4	Deliverable 4.4
D4.5	Deliverable 4.5
DA	Data Analysis
DC	Data Collection
DI	Data Interpretation
EU	European Union
GDPR	General Data Protection Regulation
ONSO	Openness to Newly 'Seeing' the Other
PAR	Participatory Action Research
PLC	Pattern Language of Commoning
RQ	Research question
UK	United Kingdom
VEN	Visual, Embodied, Narrative
WP2	Work Package 2
WP4	Work Package 4
WP5	Work Package 5

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TRANSNATIONAL CONCLUSIONS

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1. INTRODUCTION

This document presents a cross-case analysis carried out as part of Work Package 4 (WP4) of the project. Based on findings from nineteen cases, conducted across six partner institutions, the analysis is grounded in data, insights, and thematic reflections captured in earlier project outputs, particularly the deliverables produced within WP4. Building on this foundation, D4.5 provides a critical and analytical synthesis that highlights both recurring patterns and context-specific variations across cases. By doing so, it contributes to a deeper understanding of how the AECED Project's pedagogical and democratic aims have been implemented and interpreted in diverse educational and national settings.

Part 1 comprises the following sections: 1.1 provides an overview of the multi-case trialling phase and positions this deliverable as the concluding synthesis of the AECED research phase; 1.2 outlines the methodological approach to the cross-case analysis and the development of transnational conclusions; 1.3 describes the analytical process as a two-step integrated approach; 1.4 provides reflections on the use of generative AI tools in the preparation of this deliverable; 1.5 discusses the use of Participatory Action Research (PAR) as a common methodological foundation, flexibly applied across cases with varied Aesthetic and Embodied Learning for Democracy (AELD) approaches and arts-based and embodied (ABE) methods; 1.6 presents cross-case reflections on ethical considerations, and 1.7 offers cross-case reflections on the gender dimension within this research project.

1.1. Overview of the WP4 Multi-Case Trialling

This report represents the fifth and final deliverable within the scope of WP4 that has been carried out across the AECED Consortium, implementing the PAR throughout three phases:

Phase 2:	Phase 3:	Phase 4:
Agree Methodological Framework	Multi-Case Trials	Cross-Case Analysis

Figure 1: PAR Phases in the scope of WP4

Earlier WP4 deliverables were associated with these different phases, as shown in Figure 2.

Phase 2	Phase 3
D4.1 Report of methodological framework	D4.2 Reports of case research designs D4.3 Reports of case research completion D4.4 Data analysis reports

Figure 2: Past Deliverables of WP4 by phase

This deliverable represents a key milestone in the AECED Project's progression in Phase 4: cross-case analysis.

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The main purpose of this cross-case analysis is to explore how the processes, dynamics, and outcomes of the PAR interventions unfolded across nineteen cases in diverse national and cultural contexts, within four educational settings (Early Years and Primary Education; Secondary Education; Higher Education; and Adult, Professional, and Organisational Learning), and to draw out commonalities, unique aspects, and differences that contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of the findings in implementing AELD.

In line with AECED's core commitment to democratic knowledge production, the integrity of the PAR process is grounded in its relational, contextual, and political dimensions of research (Cook, 2009). Therefore, in the AECED Project, PAR is understood not only as a methodological approach but also as a medium for empowerment, critical reflection, and transformation.

The scope of the cross-case analysis extends to collaborative reflections and critical discussions on each case research output (D4.4), the identification of shared themes and emerging theories and concepts, and the articulation of national and cultural insights that inform the development of transnational conclusions. D4.5 seeks to respond to AECED's guiding research questions (RQs), which were developed in the Methodological Framework (AECED, 2023, p. 21).

RQ1. Regarding process: a) How do participants experience being introduced to and working with the Prototype Pedagogical Framework and Guides? b) In what ways is AELD co-created and facilitated through ABE methods?

RQ2. Regarding the transformational change in participants: In what ways do the Prototype Pedagogical Framework and Guides, by facilitating the co-creative design of AELD using ABE pedagogies, lead to individual and collective growth in regard to:

- feelings for democracy,
- aesthetic awareness and qualities (such as empathic, ethical, and spiritual sensibilities),
- collaborative, reflexive and critical capabilities, o openness to newly 'seeing' the other,
- willingness to move towards more reflexive and critical modes of awareness and knowing that reconnect with the body as a source of learning,
- capacity to challenge social injustices and engage creatively with conflict and antagonisms
- any other aspects that will be developed in and through the PAR process

RQ3. What influence, if any, did the researchers have on how the Framework and Guides were used and the designs of AELD that emerged in the trials?

RQ4. What evidence-based conclusions for revision and refinement of the Prototype Pedagogical Framework and Guides emerge from the experience of using the Prototypes and addressing RQ1, RQ2, and RQ3?

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The evidence-based findings will provide guiding principles for refining the Prototype Pedagogical Framework and Guides that sit at the core of the AECED Project. The launch-ready versions of the Framework, Guides and associated resources will be developed under Work Package 5 (WP5) for practical use across Europe and beyond. Furthermore, the transnational conclusions, comprising emerging themes, theories and concepts, will support scientific publications during the remaining period of the project and potentially inform further collaborative academic work beyond the project implementation period. In this way, the AECED findings will have ongoing societal and scientific impact.

This report is structured into three main parts to present a comprehensive overview of the cross-case analysis undertaken in Phase 4 of the AECED Project. Part 1: Introduction, outlines the aim and scope of this report, including the methodological approach to cross-case analysis. It also provides an overview of intra- and inter-phase findings, a summary of the methodologies and methods applied across the nineteen cases, key considerations relating to gender, ethics, and the use of generative AI in the AECED research process. Part 2: Cross-Case Analysis Findings, presents the AECED vision of democracy, key theoretical and conceptual developments across the Consortium, the transformative potential of AELD, and the main cross-case themes. It also provides evidence-based findings that inform the refinements needed for the launch-ready design of the Pedagogical Framework and Guides. The final part, Conclusion, provides an overall synthesis of the project's findings, with particular emphasis on limitations alongside cultural and national reflections, as well as implications for future research, policy, and practice. It concludes with reflections on how the WP4 findings will inform other work packages and guide the next steps in the AECED Project.

1.2. Methodological Approach: Cross-Case Analysis and Transnational Conclusions

The methodological approach to cross-case analysis and the development of transnational conclusions followed the two-stage process outlined in the AECED Project Proposal: critical discussion of case reports and the synthesising of transnational conclusions. The overall methodological approach combined structured collaborative processes, critical reflection, and iterative validation of findings to ensure methodological rigour and alignment with the project objectives.

Step 1: Critical Discussion of Case Reports

The first step focused on the discussion and critical consideration of the nineteen case reports submitted as part of D4.4. Ahead of the 3-day AECED Consortium meeting in Lisbon in March 2025, all case reports were shared via the AECED Project collaboration platform – MS Teams Lucit – to enable partners to familiarise themselves with the analysis carried out by other partners. Each educational phase representative self-organised their initial meetings with the group to discuss their findings.

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Each partner nominated at least one representative to contribute to educational phase groups. Representatives were asked to prepare a short presentation summarising key findings from their national cases, guided by a framework provided by the WP4 leader. The educational phase groups and their leads were:

- Early Years and Primary Education – Portugal (Cláudia Neves)
- Secondary Education – United Kingdom (UK) and Latvia (Philip Woods and Karine Oganisjana)
- Higher Education – Croatia (Monika Pažur)
- Adult, Professional, and Organisational Learning – Germany (Susanne Maria Weber)

Group leaders were responsible for reviewing relevant case reports in advance, facilitating the group discussions in Lisbon, and documenting the outcomes of those discussions.

On the second day of the Lisbon Consortium meeting, 90-minute parallel sessions were held for each educational phase group. These sessions allowed national representatives to present initial findings and engage in critical discussions that integrated national and transnational insights. Plenary sessions followed, with each group presenting their conclusions in 30-minute presentations, which were further discussed with both in-person and online participants.

On the third day, the Consortium held a strategic session to define the next steps for D4.5, clarify relevant tasks from the Grant Agreement, and confirm the members of the Cross-Case Analysis Group (CCAG) from each partner:

- Monika Pažur (Croatia)
- Pauliina Jääskeläinen (Finland)
- Sandra Wallenius-Korkalo (Finland)
- Kardelen Dilara Cazgir (Germany)
- Susanne Maria Weber (Germany)
- Karine Oganisjana (Latvia)
- Cláudia Neves (Portugal)
- Philip Woods (UK)

This group led the transnational conclusions under the coordination of the WP4 leader, including all AECED researchers in the analytical discussions and the collective synthesis of the research findings.

Regarding the reporting process, the Consortium agreed to first finalise conclusions at the educational phase level before synthesising transnational conclusions. This approach also ensured that conclusions at the transnational level were not abstracted prematurely but were rooted in carefully validated intra-phase findings, reflecting both the diversity and coherence of experiences within each educational phase.

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To support a coherent structure of reporting across phases, the Portuguese partners shared a draft of the Early Years and Primary Education educational phase conclusions as an example, while the UK partners proposed a draft template for reporting RQs. Throughout the WP4 process, draft templates and presentations for D4.5 reporting were provided by the German team. Based on these contributions, the WP4 leader created a consolidated reporting template, which was adopted after the Lisbon Consortium meeting.

Step 2: Synthesising Transnational Conclusions

The second step involved synthesising findings across the educational phases to develop transnational conclusions. For this cross-case stage, it was collectively agreed during the final discussion session in Lisbon to apply thematic analysis as the primary methodology. This decision reflected both the widespread use of thematic analysis by most partners during the case analysis and its suitability for identifying shared patterns and meaningful variation across diverse contexts. This process was also completed in two sub-stages.

In the first sub-stage, partners completed the educational phase reports using a common template, with self-organised meetings and virtual collaborative tools, including all AECED researchers in the process. The outcomes were discussed during a CCAG meeting, where emerging cross-cutting themes were explored.

In the second sub-stage, the WP4 leader presented a draft structure for D4.5, which was discussed and reviewed by the CCAG. Responsibilities were distributed amongst the CCAG members, a reporting timeline was agreed upon, and a collective editing and review process was established to ensure the quality and consistency of the final report.

1.3. Two-Step Integrated Approach: Intra-Phase and Inter-Phase Conclusions

Given the complexity of synthesising findings from nineteen case studies across four educational phases, the terminology around cross-case analysis required careful consideration. In line with the Project Proposal, the CCAG adopted a structured approach by distinguishing between intra-phase and inter-phase conclusions:

- Intra-phase conclusions refer to the thematic and analytical insights drawn within each educational phase, based on the phase-specific case findings.
- Inter-phase conclusions refer to the overarching transnational synthesis developed across all cases, four educational phases addressing distinguished features of adapting different VEN (Visual, Embodied, Narrative) approaches in the second part of the report.

The initial VEN approaches were defined in the research plans of the six project partners prior to the project's commencement. During the multi-case trials phase, which began with the case design process and included the development of the Prototype Pedagogical Framework and

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Guides, the AECED Consortium elaborated a variety of VEN approaches to be embedded within the prototypes and trialled across the nineteen cases.

Throughout the project, the Consortium continuously reflected on various dimensions of the VEN approaches. These ongoing reflections allowed the VEN categories, which had originally guided the case research and prototypes, to evolve and deepen over time. The methodological process began with individual case analyses conducted by national teams, followed by intra-phase synthesis coordinated by phase leads (see Step 1). Standardised templates guided the cross-case analysis.

The CCAG then undertook a comparative review of the intra-phase reports – initiated during the Lisbon Consortium Meeting and developed through iterative discussions and collaborative writing. This process identified patterns, tensions, and recurring pedagogical principles, which informed the emergence of cross-case themes. These themes were grounded in the interpretive work of each phase team, rather than imposed externally, and reflect the intersection of formal and informal learning contexts.

In D4.4, the Shared Memoing Matrix was introduced as a possible approach to support cross-case analysis through the adding of memos in relation to the different PAR phases; however, methodologically, it was not directly used to generate the transnational conclusions presented in this deliverable. Instead, our primary reference points were the intra-phase findings. When these did not provide sufficient analytical detail, we revisited the D4.4 case reports. Where further clarification was required to critically respond to RQs, researchers re-visited the Shared Memoing Matrix to support understanding and facilitate critical reflection, or discussed further with the researchers involved in the different cases.

1.4. Use of Generative AI

In line with current EU recommendations for the ethical integration of AI in research, generative AI was used in the preparation of D4.5 in a limited and non-substantive capacity. Specifically, ChatGPT and Grammarly supported grammar checks and editorial refinements. In addition, during the Adult, Professional, and Organisational Learning phase, ChatGPT was used in the early drafting of intra-phase thematic summaries in full adherence to the 'Living Guidelines on the Responsible Use of Generative AI in Research' (European Commission, 2025). No sensitive or personally identifiable data were shared with AI tools, and chat history was disabled.

In the Adult, Professional, and Organisational Learning phase, AI was employed as a supportive tool to aid researchers in comprehensive thematic exploration (Hitch, 2023; Cheligeer et al., 2023; Williams, 2024; Zhang, 2025), and articulating early draft narratives. However, responsibility for interpretation and final analytical framing remained entirely with the research team. One researcher per RQ prepared the initial thematic draft, which could include exploratory prompts generated with AI assistance. All AI-supported outputs were critically reviewed, adapted, or discarded during this initial drafting process.

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These drafts were then discussed within the intra-phase research group, reviewed by each partner, and revised collectively. Final case-level conclusions were rewritten and validated by partners to ensure empirical accuracy and contextual relevance. These refined outcomes also informed the CCAG in discussing transnational findings.

The use of generative AI remained fully transparent, ethically responsible, and always subordinate to human-led analysis and decision-making, in line with the 'Living Guidelines on the Responsible Use of Generative AI in Research' (European Commission, 2025). By using AI as a supportive tool, rather than a decision-maker, the process preserved the primacy of human critical engagement while benefiting from AI's potential to support analysis, broaden thematic sensitivity, and assist in identifying complex patterns across a highly diverse set of cases.

1.5. Overview of Research Methodology and Methods

The theoretical background of the research conducted across all cases was built on two key pillars. (1) First, the transformation of education for democracy can be achieved through aesthetic and embodied learning methods, implemented within a responsive pedagogical environment. These methods enable the experience of democracy-as-becoming, as evidenced by indicators such as power-sharing, relational well-being, transformative dialogue, and holistic learning (AECED, n.d.; Woods, 2024). All cases were grounded in the shared Prototype Pedagogical Framework and Guides at phase level, which informed the theoretical structure of their respective studies. (2) Second, each case engaged in a PAR approach, following its six interconnected phases: Introduction, Familiarisation, Collaborative Reflection, Planning, Action, and Analysis and Synthesis, as outlined in the Methodological Framework (AECED, 2023).

In the Methodological Framework (AECED, 2023), PAR was identified as a "research-to-action approach" that foregrounds participants as collaborators, co-creators, and expert 'insiders' within the research setting. Central to this approach is the recognition that participants are not merely subjects of study but serve as co-researchers, actively shaping both the inquiry process and its outcomes. As stated in the Methodological Framework, PAR "creates the conditions for practitioners to learn a shared language by joining the practice, conversations, critical debates and actions of those whose practice is investigated" (AECED, 2023, p. 16).

In the AECED Project, the PAR processes were realised through in-person, online, and hybrid approaches. A variety of ABE methods, classified as VEN, were implemented during the trials. While participants led the process through their lived, situated knowledge and contextual insight, researchers also assumed dynamic and multiple roles across all cases. These roles, shaped by AELD implementation and research strategy, ranged from immersed co-creators and expert facilitators to non-directive enablers, supporting the democratic and embodied character of the collaboration.

In this research, PAR provided a common methodological foundation for all partners, simultaneously enabling the exploration of theoretically and conceptually diverse approaches.

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Emerging theories and concepts developed within the AECED Project are presented in Section 2.2; however, partners operated within different cultural, national and contextual realities, which influenced the application of the common framework as well as the methodologies and methods employed.

The data collection methods employed across the cases revealed both shared features and case-specific distinctions. Likewise, approaches to data analysis showed common patterns alongside unique, context-sensitive strategies. While key analytical features consistently emerged across cases, each individual case also revealed distinctive characteristics in the interpretation and analysis of data – closely connected to the educational phases, national realities, and the identities of both researchers and participants.

Figure 3 provides an overview of the methodology and methods used across nineteen cases, throughout the four educational phases; the varied data collection methods resulted in rich data for analysis and interpretation.

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Case (Partner)	Approach	Methods of Data Collection (DC), Data Analysis (DA) and Interpretation (DI)
Early Years and Primary Education		
Case 1 (Croatia)	**Hybrid approach** **VEN approach: Narrative**	**DC: Focus groups, interviews, field notes, surveys** **DA/DI: Descriptive statistics, t-test for dependent groups, thematic analysis**
Case 2 (Croatia)	**Hybrid approach** **VEN approach: Embodied, narrative**	**DC: Interviews, field notes, notes from reflexive groups, surveys** **DA/DI: Descriptive statistics, thematic and content analysis**
Cases 14 and 15 (Portugal)	**Online approach** **VEN approach: Visual, narrative**	**DC: Surveys, email interviews, online discussion forums, and assignment submissions** **DA/DI: Thematic and content analysis**
Secondary Education		
Cases 11-13 (Latvia)	**Hybrid approach** **VEN approach: Visual, embodied, narrative**	**DC: Written reflections, audio recordings, holistic observations, photographs of collages** **DA/DI: Thematic and content analysis, triangulation with the Openess to Newly 'Seeing' the Other (ONSO) framework**
Case 19 (UK)	**Hybrid approach** **VEN approach: Visual, embodied, narrative**	**DC: Qualitative in-depth exploration, audio-visual recordings + researcher questions, researcher field notes and (creative) reflections, autoethnography** **DA/DI: Thematic and creative-empathic analysis**
Higher Education		
Case 3 (Croatia)	**Hybrid approach** **VEN approach: Narrative and embodied**	**DC: Group and individual interviews, defining democracy concepts, group reflections, researchers' field notes** **DA/DI: Descriptive statistics, t-test for dependent groups, thematic analysis**
Case 4 (Croatia)	**Hybrid approach** **VEN approach: Narrative and visual**	**DC: Group and individual interviews, defining democracy concepts, researchers' fieldnotes, and notes from reflexive groups** **DA/DI: Thematic analysis**
Case 5 (Finland)	**In-person approach** **VEN approach: Embodied and visual**	**DC: Researchers' fieldnotes and reflections; participants' learning diaries, interviews** **DA/DI: Theory-based and data-driven content analysis, phenomenon-based analysis, embodied analysis, post-qualitative approach**

Case (Partner)	Approach	Methods of Data Collection (DC), Data Analysis (DA) and Interpretation (DI)
Case 7 (Germany)	**In-person approach** **VEN approach: Visual and narrative**	**DC: Pattern Language of Commoning (PLC) cards and image-based in-depth peer interviews, participant reflections, participant-developed methods, researchers' fieldnotes, evaluation forms with open-ended and Likert-scale questions** **DA/DI: Discourse-oriented metaphor analysis**
Case 10 (Germany)	**Hybrid approach** **VEN approach: embodied/post-digital embodiment**	**DC: Post-digital embodiment, dance performance, interviews, researcher's fieldnotes** **DA/DI: Interpretation from researcher's memos, collective mind mapping, developing embodied scenes of togetherness**
Adult, Professional, and Organisational Learning		
Case 6 (Finland)	**In-person approach** **VEN approach: Visual, embodied**	**DC: Researchers' fieldnotes and reflections, participants' learning diaries, interviews** **DA/DI: Theory-based and data-driven content analysis, phenomenon-based analysis, embodied analysis, post-qualitative approach, movement analysis**
Case 8 (Germany)	**Hybrid approach** **VEN approach: Visual, narrative**	**DC: Interviews, participants' written reflections, participants' evaluations in presentation format** **DA/DI: Discourse-oriented dispositive analysis**
Case 9 (Germany)	**Hybrid approach** **VEN approach: Visual, embodied, narrative**	**DC: Survey, interviews, collective reflections, participant-developed methods, researchers' fieldnotes** **DA/DI: Triangulation of methods, collaborative co-analysis, Discourse-oriented dispositive analysis**
Case 12 (Latvia)	**Hybrid approach** **VEN approach: Visual, embodied, narrative**	**DC: Written reflections, audio recordings, holistic observations, photographs of collages** **DA/DI: Thematic and content analysis, triangulation with the ONSO Framework**
Cases 16 and 17 (Portugal)	**Online approach** **VEN approach: Visual, narrative**	**DC: Online surveys, forum discussions, personal reflections, project proposals, photographs, videos** **DA/DI: Thematic and content analysis**
Case 18 (UK)	**Hybrid, independent approach** **VEN approach: Visual, embodied, narrative**	**DC: video recordings of sessions; outputs from session activities; group collage-based interviews; individual interviews; qualitative questionnaire; participant reflections; researcher reflections, fieldnotes and creative responses** **DA/DI: Combined reflexive thematic and creative-empathetic analysis**

Figure 3: Methodology and Methods across 19 Cases

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1.6. Ethical Reflections

Detailed reflections on the ethical procedures, ethical considerations and ethical reflections in the research process have been provided in previous deliverables. For case-specific details, see the previous WP4 deliverables: D4.2 (ethical permissions during the research design phase), D4.3 (ethical considerations following the conduct of research), and D4.4 (ethical reflection after data analysis). In addition, each partner developed a detailed ethical procedure and accompanying reflections, as reported in D1.2.

D4.5 synthesises transnational conclusions grounded in the ethical reflections emerging from the nineteen cases documented in D4.4. Rather than providing a detailed review of each case, this report offers a synthesis of the overarching ethical considerations that emerged across the cases, focusing on insights relevant to cross-case analysis within the AECED Project.

In line with the ethical guidelines of the European Union (EU) General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) and its British equivalent (UK GDPR), all partners developed participant information sheets and informed consent forms for each case study, clearly explaining the project and research. The materials aimed to strike a balance between providing all necessary legal and ethical information, and ensuring the content was accessible and non-intimidating. Participants, parents or carers voluntarily signed the consent forms and were informed of their right to withdraw at any time.

Regarding the personal data collection and processing, all data remained within national teams and institutions, and no personal identifiable data were transferred amongst partners for the purposes of cross-case analysis. Instead, the transnational synthesis was conducted using intra-phase reports prepared by each educational phase team, as described above. Where necessary, researchers referred back to D4.4 case reports, or the Shared Memoing Matrix where no personal identifiable data is present. This approach ensured that all data transfer for transnational analysis remained fully compliant with (EU/UK) GDPR and ethical requirements.

Ethical reflections on the research process focused on communication both between researchers and participants, and among participants themselves, highlighting the influence of prior relationships and dual roles. For instance, Case 4 (Croatia) addressed a supportive and facilitative educator-student dynamic in Higher Education, which participants did not find problematic. Participants viewed researchers as facilitators who guided discussions, ensured community voices were heard, and encouraged skill development and self-reliance. Both observations and participant feedback highlighted that researchers were seen as change agents advocating for policy improvements while consciously avoiding replicating the traditional teaching role, instead fostering knowledge co-creation and student autonomy through PAR and ABE methods.

Similarly, Case 18 (UK) paid close attention to peer relationships, both amongst participants and between participants and researchers. The researchers maintained a light-touch presence,

avoiding domination of the creative process and instead supporting participants to take ownership, acting more as facilitators than instructors.

Regarding language, Case 8 (Germany) employed informal language ('du') to promote a low-hierarchy interaction style in their Adult, Professional and Organisational Learning phase case. In Latvia (Cases 11-13), relationships between researchers and participants were shaped through in-person AECED training sessions conducted for teachers, school principals, and stakeholders, as well as through researchers' ongoing presence in schools during AELD trials across both iterations. These approaches fostered trust and openness, encouraging active engagement in co-research and co-creation.

Reflecting on the role of researchers, Finland, Germany, and the UK (Cases 5, 6, 10, 18) found that the embodied and interactive nature of ABE pedagogies required continual self-reflection to ensure inclusivity and critical awareness of the researchers' own positionality. This reflexivity ensures awareness of how their identities and biases influence power dynamics and the learning environment, promoting inclusivity and participation as a feature of the democratic value of responsiveness. Researchers emphasised commitment to critical self-awareness, reflecting the ethical principles embedded in ABE pedagogies. These findings affirm the importance of continuous reflexivity to support ethical and inclusive practice within AELD.

Similarly, as reported in Cases 1, 2, 3, 7, 11, 12, and 13 (from Croatia, Germany, and Latvia), participants were encouraged to reflect on how their own intersectional identities, i.e. gender, race, class, influenced their pedagogical approaches. Here, ongoing professional development in ethical, embodied, and inclusive learning was regarded as essential.

Research from Case 7 (Germany) demonstrated that informal gatherings can help overcome institutional hierarchies, transcending the traditional learner-teacher divide. Such settings enabled more open dialogue and collaborative co-creation within the AECED Project.

Reflections from the Croatian research team (Case 3) indicated that the implementation of AELD within research contexts ideally requires a multidisciplinary team comprising a drama expert, an education for democracy specialist, and an observer to monitor participant responses. However, the specific team composition may vary according to the nature of the activity; for instance, the involvement of a drama expert may be essential for activities incorporating acting, role-play, or other performative elements.

Addressing identity issues and ethical complexity, participants in Case 4 (Croatia) were invited to define their identity using an "identity flower," avoiding predefined categories. Ethical considerations were raised about how to handle emerging stereotypes, with the research team opting for participant-led responsibility and group reflection rather than direct intervention. In addition, concerns centred around creating a safe space for difficult conversations, fostering safe environments for dealing with discomfort or conflict sensitively. These spaces enabled meaningful engagement with complex, emotionally charged topics, especially around identity and belonging.

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In the Finnish (Cases 5, 6) and German (Case 10) research, it was found that methods involving bodily practice, particularly dance, require emotionally supportive facilitation. Beyond this, all partners identified the creation of emotionally supportive and safe spaces as an ethical imperative, especially in relation to refining the Prototype Pedagogical Framework and Guides.

To address any potential discomfort, participants in all cases were offered consent-based participation throughout the research, with the freedom to opt in or out of activities at any time without pressure. They were supported through pre-activity briefings and reflections following the activities. Facilitators were encouraged to acknowledge discomfort or resistance when it arose and to work constructively with these emotional responses as part of the learning process. These practices aimed to ensure that emotional intensity – when it occurred – was met with care, respect, and appropriate support.

In summary, this cross-case ethical synthesis underscores the depth and complexity of ethical engagement within the AECED project. Rather than approaching ethics as a fixed procedural checklist, these cases illustrate a dynamic, context-sensitive, and relational approach – rooted in care and reflexivity. The findings affirm that fostering AELD requires an ongoing commitment to ethical reflection, mutual trust, and the cultivation of safe and responsive learning spaces. This transnational synthesis thus contributes to the development of ethically grounded educational practices as well as research that are not only legally compliant but also relationally and pedagogically transformative.

1.7. Gender Reflections

The AECED project recognises gender dimension as a significant element throughout the conduct of case studies and analysis of data. This section offers a brief reflection on gender across the project and synthesises of key thematic areas relevant to cross-case analysis. Country- and/or case-specific reflections on gender are to be found in previous deliverables D4.3 and D4.4.

The underlying challenge in assessing gender in the AECED research is related to original research plans and related ethical permissions. Most partners did not directly ask participants their sex and/or gender, neither was this considered in the organisational ethical pre-assessments. In many instances, collecting information of the sex/gender of the participants would have raised questions of the purpose of this, as no other demographic information was collected. Thus, in most cases, the perception of the gender of participants was an observation of researchers, rather than by participants' self-identification. Consequently, the AECED project cannot assess the exact ratio of different genders participating in the project activities (during research) or measure numerically if the project has fostered equality (if equality is understood in terms of sex/ gender balance in the group).

The design and implementation of AECED research was aimed to be gender-sensitive, respecting participants' self-identification, avoiding reproduction of gender stereotypes and remaining mindful of the power dynamics related to gender and gendered practices. Gender-sensitive tools

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and language were integrated across cases. Course content, platforms, and examples avoided stereotypes and supported inclusive participation. In this context, the AECED project aimed to promote equity. 'Equity' and 'equality' have been broadly used interchangeably within education and policy (Espinoza, 2007); however, the term equity is better suited to the project's aims, as AELD has the potential to help educators and learners alike notice the differing starting points different people or groups have in developing their democratic capabilities and sensibilities.

In the AECED research, gender – as informed by feminist research – was seen not as a fixed identity but as a dynamic, cultural and relational force shaped by intersecting identities (Katila, Meriläinen & Bell, 2023). This means that gender is a socially and culturally constructed and corporeally performed entity embedded with cultural expectations, rights and freedoms (Butler, 1990). It orients the way people position and habit themselves in their cultural context and impacts how cultural boundaries and possibilities are drawn between different people. Viewing gender intersectionally means assessing it along other essential axes of identity, such as age, ethnic background, religious commitment, or sexual orientation (Crenshaw, 1991; Collins & Bilge, 2020). Parts of such axes of identity are viewed as sensitive data under the EU GDPR and its British equivalent. Therefore, the project did not explicitly ask for or assess such identity markers. While engaging in the research, however, some participants raised such dimensions for discussion; for instance, how being a female/ male and representative of ethnic minority or indigenous group affects one's voice in a group or educational setting. These instances opened up a fruitful avenue to discuss such issues with the group.

Although the AECED Gender Guideline and joint discussions provided a shared foundation for gender reflection within the AECED research, its application was shaped by the diverse national contexts of the participating countries. These contexts differ in terms of gender policies, cultural norms, and socio-political conditions, which influenced how gender was understood, discussed, and operationalised within each case.

One of the main gender-related notions of the AECED project is the gendered nature of ABE education. Overall, the field of education is gendered in Europe, with an overrepresentation of females as educators (OECD, 2017). Ironically, although the field of education is female oriented, women are underrepresented in leadership positions (Dahlvig & Longman, 2021; Friedman, 2021). Further, "women are on average over-represented in the fields of health, welfare, arts, humanities, social sciences and journalism, and are under-represented in STEM" (meaning science, technology, engineering and mathematics) (Viarengo, 2021). Accordingly, the majority of AECED research teams were predominantly female (Croatia, Finland, Germany, Portugal, and the UK; Cases 1-10, 14-19), with only Latvia representing a more gender-balanced researcher composition (Cases 11-13). This highlights the need to critically assess the re-production of current gendered practices and raises the need to consider gender in the recruitment processes for such future projects in the field of education.

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The AECED project is mainly composed of female researchers, which reflects the gendered nature of aesthetic and embodied learning in European contexts. Gendered perceptions persist: arts-related subjects are often perceived as more feminine, juxtaposed with 'masculine' subjects: science, technology, mathematics and engineering. The perception of aesthetic and embodied learning as feminine was raised in several cases. In Finland (Cases 5 and 6) discussions and reflective diaries revealed notions of gendered styles of emotional expression and communication. For example, in a Higher Education setting, speaking about emotions was perceived as feminine, and in another instance, participants remarked that actually male voices dominated in a group setting. Through facilitation, these notions could be discussed and critically evaluated. They helped also to fathom what kind of role gendered practices might play in practicing democracy. For further research, and to avoid gender bias, it would be crucial to engage all genders in discussion and critical reflection on the perceived gendered nature of AELD.

Second, the AECED research showed the potential of AELD in stretching and diversifying gender roles and expectations but simultaneously stressed the importance of staying aware of gender stereotypes.

Research found that even though there was no explicit gender stereotyping, traditional gender norms subtly influenced emotional expression and student engagement. In Latvia (Case 11), for example, boys were observed to be more hesitant to show vulnerability, while girls demonstrated more collaborative communication, affecting relational dynamics and participation. However, drama activities promoted openness to play with gender roles and challenged normative emotional and behavioural expressions, enhancing emotional intelligence and relational equity. Similarly, in Finland (Case 5), researchers reflected that drama and embodied exercises risked reinforcing traditional gender roles unless deliberately designed with gender-sensitive and diverse character representations. Additionally, in Finland (Case 6), discussions amongst and comments by participants showed that reflecting on emotions was frequently regarded as a feminine practice, revealing how gendered expectations around emotional expression can impact engagement, even without overt stereotyping. These findings informed recommendations for pedagogical strategies – such as role reversals, rotating leadership, and inclusive character roles – that may challenge underlying norms and encourage equitable emotional expression and participation for all students, regardless of gender identity.

Third, the AECED research revealed the potential of AELD in addressing a variety of inequalities, gender included. As Rhoades (2021) argues "arts-based pedagogies provide unique, compelling pathways for teaching and learning that can permit entry to and support the success of all students regardless of gender, race, sexuality, religion, linguistic diversity, ability level, socioeconomic status, and other identity categories". In Finland (Case 5), the researcher conducted an embodied intervention which conveyed imagined inequalities in the group. In the intervention, a pink balloon floated above students some of whom stood on chairs while others reached from the floor, creating a temporary imbalance of access. As the game unfolded moments

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of hesitation, cooperation and spontaneous support challenged these imagined hierarchies, offering a playful yet meaningful reflection on how democratic participation can be reimagined through collective action and shared agency. Research from Portugal (Cases 14-17) identified gender-related future research recommendations, emphasising the need to examine gender differences in digital engagement, professional development, and support strategies for underrepresented genders in education. Although the AECED research offers some insights on gender and implementing ABE pedagogies through AELD innovation, it is recommended that further projects address these research gaps.

Evidence-based findings for refining the Prototype Pedagogical Framework and Guides across all cases highlighted the importance of gender sensitivity, inclusivity, and intersectionality. These recommendations are grounded in researchers' reflections, particularly in contexts where participants reported that traditional norms around gender and emotional expression limited engagement or constrained pedagogical effectiveness. Materials must therefore address the intersection of gender, i.e. representation of different bodies, to foster inclusive and responsive learning environments. Furthermore, reflective practices on how educators' own gender identities and biases influence classroom dynamics were found to deepen critical engagement and improve inclusive facilitation. As a result, a section to support understanding and to critically assess the gendered practices and perceptions on aesthetic and embodied learning is needed in the Pedagogical Framework. More broadly speaking, the gendered nature of AELD should be considered in teacher education, adult and professional learning.

In sum, integrating gender into education, particularly within AELD innovation, is not merely about achieving gender balance; it requires a critical rethinking of power dynamics, participation, and education. It involves recognising the gendered perceptions of knowledge and aesthetic and embodied learning, and designing inclusive learning environments in which all students can flourish.

Building on this foundation, the project advances a critical perspective on education for democracy by explicitly engaging with three interrelated dimensions: gender, aesthetics, and embodied methodologies. Gender is addressed not only in terms of equity, but through the interrogation of power relations that shape educational spaces and experiences. Aesthetics is understood both as a philosophical engagement with perception and meaning-making, and as a basis for arts-based and sensory approaches to pedagogy. Embodied methodologies highlight the centrality of the body, affect, and spatial relations in how learning and participation are experienced. Together, these dimensions are not supplementary or peripheral, but integral to fostering democratic education that is critically reflective, inclusive, and attuned to the complexities of lived experience. As such, they hold relevance for practitioners, researchers, and policymakers committed to advancing more just and responsive educational practices.

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2. CROSS-CASE ANALYSIS FINDINGS

This section of the report presents the main findings of the AECED project, including cross-cutting themes and its theoretical and conceptual contributions. The structure follows a logic grounded in evidence-based outcomes and practical recommendations.

The data are presented across multiple levels – some addressing theoretical foundations, others focusing on pedagogical innovations and practical examples. Distinct analytical lenses are applied in each section of the AECED cross-case analysis, with each offering a specific layer of inquiry. Collectively, they contribute to a multidimensional understanding of democracy, pedagogy, and transformation within the project.

While the findings are presented in a linear sequence, they are inherently interconnected and should be read as part of a holistic framework. Each finding builds upon and relates to others – some function as overarching insights, while simultaneously emerging from more context-specific observations.

Section 2.1: AECED Vision of Democracy introduces the AECED Project's approach to democracy. It outlines the deepening of understandings of democracy-as-becoming and identifies the core democratic values informing the design and implementation of AELD.

Section 2.2: Theoretical and Conceptual Developments outlines the key theories and concepts developed throughout the multi-case trials phase by the AECED Consortium to understand the implementation of ABE pedagogies and to advance learning opportunities for democracy through AELD innovation.

Section 2.3: The Potential of Aesthetic and Embodied Learning to Transform Education for Democracy synthesises findings from the case studies, examining the impact of AELD on participant engagement, the use of the Prototype Pedagogical Framework and Guides, and the facilitation of AELD. The analysis centres on three levels of transformation – epistemic transformation, individual and collective learning, and organisational and institutional transformation – as explained in the Methodological Framework (AECED, 2023). This section responds specifically to guiding RQ2, which focuses on the transformational growth of the participants in AECED (AECED, 2023, p. 21).

Section 2.4: Cross-Case Themes and Reflections identifies cross-cutting themes that were formulated during the analysis of the AECED Project's data in response to guided RQs 1 and 3, which relate to the AECED process and researcher influence respectively (AECED, 2023, p. 21). These are presented under nine thematic sub-headings and reflect shared patterns, challenges, and innovations across educational phases and national contexts.

Section 2.5: Evidence-Based Findings for Refining the Prototype Pedagogical Framework and Guides compiles findings from intra-phase and inter-phase analyses to propose evidence-based

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refinements to the Prototype Pedagogical Framework and Guides, responding to guiding RQ4 (AECED, 2023, p. 21).

2.1. AECED Vision of Democracy

The AECED Project's view of democracy has been defined and described in the Prototype Pedagogical Framework and Guides, Part I (Jääskeläinen et al., 2024), in the Methodological Framework (AECED, 2023), as well other project outputs such as the project's position paper on 'The Four Dimensions of Holistic Democracy' (Woods, 2024). In this section, a summary of the core features of the project's conception of democracy – democracy-as-becoming – are summarised. Further refinements and development of the project's conception of democracy-as-becoming are discussed in subsequent sections.

Democracy is often seen as a set of institutional arrangements. At its simplest, the idea of democracy is that governance should not be done to people but should be done by people. One conclusion from embracing this fundamental and influential defining idea is that democracy is a set of institutional arrangements that enable people to participate in discussion, debate different ideas and viewpoints and make decisions collectively. Any particular democracy – whether at group, local, organisational, national or transnational level – is constituted by the institutional arrangements for empowering people devised by that democracy's creators.

This emphasis on a set of institutional arrangements, however, tends to lead towards focusing predominantly on democracy as a system and suggests that what is most important is the design of democratic systems: democracy is designed, and changes made in the design of that system over time to improve it; and people are actors within that democratic system and learn to make use of what benefits of influence and participation it may offer. This system-orientated view of democracy tends to encourage thinking of democracy as an ideal state of institutional arrangements which it is important to work towards. Emphasis is given to seeing democracy as an entity - a societal system - to be achieved.

The AECED Project gives a different emphasis in its conception of democracy. Whilst institutional arrangements (such as legal rights and institutionalised opportunities for debate and participation in decisions) are important, privileging the view of democracy as a set of institutional arrangements draws attention away from the 'life-blood' of democracy. That 'life-blood' is the human process of acting and living with others democratically as people who have evolving personal and social identities and who interpret and creatively interact with the world of which they are part.

From the outset of the AECED project, democracy was termed democracy-as-becoming. This was done with the intent of integrating into our view of democracy recognition of it as a process rather than an entity. There are three features of democracy-as-becoming that we highlight and that we have been reflecting on and refining through the AECED research.

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The first are key principles that express the holistic nature of democracy-as-becoming. These principles are power-sharing, transforming dialogue, holistic learning and relational well-being. They describe a rich kind of democracy that is more than about democratic activity being a way of advancing one's own interests and competing for influence or positions of power by means of democratic legitimacy. Underpinned by these principles, democracy is a way of living together that requires open dialogue and mutual respect, as well as opportunities to grow as relational beings and to participate in co-creating our social environment and shaping the decisions that affect us.

The second are the democratic values of equity, freedom and responsiveness. We emphasise equity as a situational sensitivity which aims at furthering equal opportunities for learning, mutual respect, participation and the lessening of unjustified socio-economic inequalities. Freedom concerns the exercise of choice and agency, informed by the democratic principles indicated above, including respectful self-expression and space-giving to others' freedom. Responsiveness involves the valuing of being open and responsive to oneself and others (and to the non-human world), not only verbally but also in bodily responses (feelings, emotions and sensations) which emphasise the embodiment of agency; it also involves valuing the creation of 'safe-as-possible' learning spaces. We consider these values not only as abstract ideas but also as embodied activities which show in our daily practices and can be cultivated: once people understand how equity, freedom and responsiveness emerge in reciprocal embodied encounters, they can learn how to further develop them through such encounters.

The third is the character of democracy-as-becoming. As explained above, democracy is viewed in the AECED project as a process (rather than an entity) involving people who interpret and creatively interact with the world of which they are part. Democracy is therefore a process of becoming, meaning that democracy is lived through bodily experiences and emerges from new ways of 'seeing' and connectedness through aesthetic and embodied encounters in a continuous relational creation. From this perspective, democracy is never a 'finished product'. Reflection and interpretation; the living out of principles of power sharing, transforming dialogue, holistic learning and relational well-being; and the practicing of the values of equity, freedom and responsiveness are all, ideally, enduring features. But their manifestation in practice, and the forms, direction and ongoing outcomes of democracy are not predetermined. Democracy is in a constant process of becoming towards possible futures which cannot be definitively defined in advance. The emergence from democratic interaction and co-creation of new possibilities is an animating and engaging feature of democracy-as-becoming. Where democracy-as-becoming flourishes, it carries the promise of realising as-yet-unarticulated potentialities.

2.2. Theoretical and Conceptual Developments

The framing of the AECED Vision of Democracy, as outlined in Section 2.1, has shaped AECED, through its visibility in the Prototype Framework, Guides and associated AECED resources.

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Through the process of AECED, however, concepts and theoretical insights have been further developed. These developments, grounded in the PAR process and emergent from the analysis of empirical data across the different cases, are presented in this section. These concepts are: 1) *Democracy-as-becoming* from the point of view of posthuman, phenomenological and feminist materialist thought (Croatia, Finland, Germany; Cases 3-5, 7, 10); 2) *Democratic sensibility* as a way of expressing the personal and collective growth that AELD is intended to nurture (UK Cases 18, 19); 3) *Threefold Notion of Democracy* and the *Commoning* approach behind it (Germany Cases 7-9); 4) *Openness to Newly 'Seeing' the Other* as a democratic capability (Latvia Cases 11–13); and 5) The *Acceptive Gaze* (AG) as a pedagogical intervention (Finland Cases 5 and 6). The key elements of each concept are summarised based on multi-case trialling and relevant theoretical literature.

2.2.1. Democracy-as-becoming

As indicated in Section 2.1 above, one of the key concepts of the AECED Project is democracy-as-becoming and a better understanding of what it means in different educational contexts was developed during the PAR research. Democracy-as-becoming was described in the Prototype Pedagogical Framework as "lived through bodily experiences and emerges from new ways of 'seeing' and connectedness through aesthetic and embodied experiences in a continuous relational creation" (Jääskeläinen et al., 2024, p. 10). According to this view, the idea of democracy is a constantly evolving, embodied negotiation, which resonates with John Dewey's (1993) notion of democracy as a "way of life," and with Derrida's (1994) idea of democracy as always "to come" – a promise and an impossibility that must be perpetually re-enacted. Democracy, in this view, is lived through embodied encounters, ethical relations, and shared uncertainties. It is made and remade through the everyday textures of pedagogical life: how power circulates in classrooms, how voices are heard or excluded, and how educators and students relate to one another and to knowledge itself (Biesta, 2011; Ruitenberg, 2009; Sánchez & Sebastián, 2024).

The understanding of democracy-as-becoming was developed further by the AECED Higher Education research sub-group with radical democratic theory and enriched by posthuman, phenomenological and feminist materialist thought. These theories deepen the notion of democracy as assemblages in movement (Asenbaum, 2022), where democratic practices emerge through entanglements of bodies, discourses, technologies, institutional architectures, and affective atmospheres. Becoming democratic, then, is not a linear development but a dynamic, embodied and situated process, continuously shaped by ecological, material, and relational conditions (Barad, 2007; Braidotti, 2013; Deleuze & Guattari, 1987). Merleau-Ponty's ontology of flesh (1968) offers a foundation for rethinking democracy as embodied experience that is connected to the flesh of the social (Plot, 2012). Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology of intercorporeality situates democratic agency not merely as cognitive or discursive, but as arising through the material and sensorial dimensions of human experience, which also provides a

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justification for the embodied methods as interventions for education for democracy and democratic learning.

This view resonates with newer educational scholarship emphasising the role of affect, emotion, and embodiment in learning (Probyn, 2005; Sánchez & Sebastián, 2024; Zembylas, 2013). Machin (2022) builds on this by showing how bodily interactions are central to democratic practices. Democracy-as-becoming, then, is an always-emergent assemblage of bodies, spaces, temporalities, affects, and discourses. It is felt in the textures (social flesh) of everyday life – in classroom layouts, eye contact, silences, atmospheres, and the unspoken structures of power that shape who can speak and who is heard. Gravett (2023) frames these educational spaces as relational pedagogies – learning environments shaped not only by content and instruction, but by the quality of relations between people, materials, and systems. This view of pedagogy foregrounds education for democracy as an entangled process, one that is never complete and always conditioned by historical, material, and institutional contexts.

2.2.2. Democratic sensibility

The UK Team has been working on the concept of democratic sensibility. This concept is being formulated as a way of expressing the personal and collective growth that AELD is intended to nurture. Work on the idea of democratic sensibility is seeking to synthesise the elements of growth that are identified in the AECED Project's RQ2, draw from a range of relevant literature, such as Docherty (2006), Ferran (2022), Kennedy (2017, 2022), Rosa (2024), Todd (2023) and Woods (2016, 2021), and explore from the AECED case research findings implications for understanding and refining the concept.

Democratic sensibility is a particular form of sensibility that has a vital influence in nurturing democracy. Democratic sensibility refers to a heightened sensibility towards feelings and bodily senses in democratic activity and towards connectedness and a fundamental understanding of equality of worth (within and between the human and natural worlds). It involves being open to learning from and with others, as well as embracing new possibilities. The conceptualisation of democratic sensibility at this stage in its development encompasses the following elements:

- aesthetic-embodied awareness - that is, appreciation of and sensitivity to the aesthetic and embodied dimension of being human and the ability to learn from this in order to enrich ourselves and democratic practice
- connectedness - that is, our awareness of and felt interconnection with self, with others and the world of which we are an interconnected part
- qualities exercised in the practice of democracy - that is, attributes such as humility, respect, empathy and compassion
- a feel for democracy that includes:

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- feeling towards democratic values; that is, the sense evoked by the values emphasised in the AECED Project of equity, freedom and openness (responsiveness)
- feeling towards dimensions of democracy, which includes feelings of warmth, pleasure and positivity towards the idea and practice of the four dimensions of democracy (power sharing, transforming dialogue, holistic learning and relational well-being)

2.2.3. The Commoning Approach: threefold notion of democracy

The commoning perspective transforms how we know, organise, and live by rejecting the notion that humans are solely rational, self-interested individuals (Helfrich & Bollier, 2019). Instead, it calls for an onto-epistemic shift toward imagining a better life by changing how we think and relate to the world (Collet-Sabé & Ball, 2024, p. 3). Critiquing the homo economicus discourse, portrayed as rational, autonomous and self-interested, the commoning perspective highlights its failure to account for the relational, affective and ecological dimensions of human existence (Helfrich & Bollier, 2019, pp. 54, 78). It advocates for an onto-epistemic shift towards interdependency and relationality, challenging socially alienated and ecologically indifferent subjectivities in favour of more cooperative, compassionate and contextually embedded ways of being (Helfrich & Bollier, 2019, pp. 110–111). Applied to education, commoning offers an alternative episteme that reimagines education and learning as a democratic, interrelational, and participatory process nurturing care for self, others and the non-human world (Collet-Sabé & Ball, 2024, p. 3).

Commoning embodies a threefold notion of democracy: social togetherness, peer governance, and a care economy (Helfrich & Bollier, 2019), which resonates with John Dewey's (1916) experience-based theory of democracy. The German Team engaged this framework through three Cases: Case 7 emphasised social togetherness and collective learning in Higher Education; Case 8 focused on peer governance and organisational transformation in further education; Case 9 collaborated with commoning practitioners to explore the care economy and broader epistemic transformation.

To operationalise these principles in practice, the German Team offered the PLC in the context of AELD. Originating from Christopher Alexander's architectural concept of pattern language, designed to identify recurring problems and solutions that enhance liveliness and wellbeing (Alexander et al., 1995, p. X), the PLC adapts this approach to social and organisational contexts. Building on this foundation, Silke Helfrich and David Bollier (2019) developed 28 initial patterns of commoning through extensive research with cooperatives, solidarity-based agriculture groups, commoning initiatives, and co-housing communities worldwide. These patterns embody the threefold notion of democracy described above.

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As the existing 32 patterns are only the beginning of establishing a new language of patterns of eupraxia, or 'best practices', blank cards also allow users to discover new ones. By this, the PLC supports a living mode of 'being in the world' and 'worlding' as an individual, collective and organisational lived transformational practice. Each card in the PLC deck contains a visual representation of the pattern, a concise verbal description, real-world examples illustrating the pattern in practice, and references to related or 'neighbouring' patterns to highlight their connections with other patterns. Originally developed in Germany and initially available only in German, the card deck has now been translated into English and newly designed to enable the discovery of further patterns. The German team used the PLC in the Higher Education phase (Case 7) as well for organisational change towards social togetherness, peer governance and a care economy (Case 8). By involving the PLC card users as experts in the research, the PLC was used to create methodical interventions for epistemic transformation (Case 9).

From an organisational education perspective (Göhlich et al., 2018), democracy is understood as a continuous, open practice involving individual and collective learning, organisational change, and epistemic transformation. The PLC functions as an epistemic boundary object, enabling participants to reimagine themselves and their relations within democratic processes. Drawing on Dewey's call for a new audacity of imagination and Foucauldian concepts of heterotopic organising (Weber, 2022), the German team used the PLC to co-create alternative epistemes in education that resonate with aesthetic and embodied methods.

Within the AECED project, particularly in AELD innovation, the PLC served as an epistemic and methodological bridge within the German cases specifically, emphasising embodied, relational, and participatory processes that cultivate the threefold notion of democracy. Closely aligned with AELD's focus on democracy as a lived, embodied practice, the PLC provides a practical and relational framework that fosters democratic values through participatory, co-creative, and embodied experiences. By deepening collective engagement beyond traditional hierarchies and boundaries, the PLC enriches AELD pedagogies, embodying democracy as a lived and transformative practice.

2.2.4. Openness to Newly 'Seeing' the Other

The Latvian team developed the theory to Openness to Newly 'Seeing' the Other (ONSO), which was mentioned in the AECED Project Proposal (AECED, 2022), as one of the capacities that was thought to be essential as a democratic capability. To understand what this means in practice, the Latvian Team defines it as the cognitive, emotional, and relational capacity to engage with difference in a way that moves beyond preconceptions, stereotypes, or fixed perspectives (Freire, 2005; Dewey, 1933, 1934; Vives & FeldmanHall, 2018). It involves an evolving process of recognising, understanding, and valuing the perspectives, identities, and lived experiences of others through empathetic (Brown, 2012; Krznaric, 2014), dialogical (Dallmayr, 2015; Woods,

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2005, 2021), aesthetic (Docherty, 2006; Woods et al., 2023), and embodied engagement (Lakoff & Johnson, 1999; Woods et al., 2020).

To explore the effect of AELD on participants' openness to newly 'seeing' the other, an ONSO Framework was elaborated in Latvia (Cases 11-13) based on six dimensions that characterise cognitive, emotional, interpersonal, ethical, and transformative elements of openness:

1. Mental processes fostering reflective thinking for openness, focusing on critical reflection, metacognition, and perspective-shifting (Dewey, 1933; Kemmis et al., 2014; Kompridis, 2006).
2. Sensory and emotional experiences cultivating openness, focusing on aesthetic sensitivity, emotional receptivity, and embodied perception (Dewey, 1934; Brown, 2012; Chacón et al., 2024; Woods et al., 2023).
3. Interactive dynamics promoting engagement with others, focusing on dialogue, mutuality, relational co-presence (Freire, 2005; Dallmayr, 2015; Woods, 2021).
4. Self-awareness of the impact of identity, emotions and biases on interactions, focusing on reflexivity, cultural humility, and relational consciousness (McCubbin & McCubbin, 2013; Krznaric, 2014; Woods, 2019).
5. Moral principles that support inclusive and just interactions, focusing on ethical responsibility, justice, and human dignity (Levinas, 1961; Scanlon, 1998; Dallmayr, 2015; Woods, 2005).
6. Active engagement driving personal and collective transformation, focusing on practice, agency, and transformation through participation (Freire, 2005; Kemmis et al., 2014; Woods et al., 2023).

These six ONSO dimensions serve as the basis for identifying six corresponding ONSO components, each aligned with one dimension:

1. Cognitive Flexibility
2. Aesthetic and Embodied Awareness
3. Dialogic and Relational Disposition
4. Reflexive Self-Awareness
5. Ethical and Democratic Sensibility
6. Transformative Engagement

These ONSO components, along with their 23 associated subcomponents, formed the foundation of the ONSO Framework. This framework was used to triangulate the findings from the qualitative content analysis of students' and teachers' written reflections, the thematic analysis of interviews, and post-trial discussions in Latvian Cases. To achieve this, the developed categories and

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identified themes were aligned with the ONSO components and subcomponents to determine which aspects of ONSO were most actively fostered through the application of AELD across various learning contexts.

2.2.5. The Acceptive Gaze

The AG (Jääskeläinen, 2023) was explored by the Finnish team (Cases 5 and 6) as an embodied, pedagogical intervention for democratic learning and especially as a preparation for safe use of embodied methods. During the PAR, this intervention and concept were recognised and discussed with participants, and the analysis shows that it has much potential in cultivating all the democratic values and principles of AELD (see D4.4. Cases 5, 6 reports). The Finnish team continues developing the theory of the AG in several publications, reflecting on it in relation to the research data.

According to the research data (Cases 5, 6), the AG – as a chosen attitude towards others and oneself – opens up space to recognise and evaluate one's automatic, judgmental thoughts and their origins in an empathic, but critical way. When agreeing at the beginning and repeating this attitude within a learning group, the AG can release excess tensions, which can emerge while engaging with embodied methods and with that create a more relaxed and trusting atmosphere to encounter the possible discomfort these methods may evoke. Practising the AG and choosing to return to it repeatedly is choosing an ethical and empathic attitude towards oneself and others. It is the acceptance of imperfection and incompleteness of the joint experience of democracy-as-becoming. It is a lifelong learning process instead of one-time implementation, and it might face resistance as it requires a shift of mindset, challenging the judgmental and hierarchical evaluation culture within educational systems.

The participants in Finland (Cases 5 and 6) reflected that AG creates feelings of freedom, which encourages one to express themselves during the learning situation. They experienced that the AG freed them from the excess pressures to please others or go with the 'general' opinion, if one does not agree. The explicit social contract of looking at oneself and others with AG evoked thoughts of a symbiosis, which pointed out how AG is in continuous, reciprocal negotiation between the bodies and how seeing, being seen, and seeing oneself are connected (see Merleau-Ponty, 2012). Instead of going with the instant judgments of something being good/bad or better/worse, the AG aims at noticing qualities of the body movements (e.g. use of space, dynamics of movements, tempos and rhythms; see Jääskeläinen, 2023) and recognising what kinds of emotions and thoughts evoke in the learning situation and the looking at them with acceptance. It is a whole-body experiencing and creating room for one's and others' expressions with care and empathic criticality. Finland's research (Cases 5 and 6) showed how the AG enables the engaging with AELD's democratic values and principles, and is an attitude which calls for the co-building of a safe learning environment.

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The refinement and development of the concepts that underpin AECED have supported both the cross-case analysis and interpretation process. These concepts are being further refined and developed through the writing-up of the research for AECED deliverables and scientific publications. The next sections, 2.3, 2.4 and 2.5, will present the cross-case analysis findings, and will make reference to the key concepts outlines above where relevant.

2.3. The Potential of Aesthetic and Embodied Learning to Transform Education for Democracy

This section examines the transformative potential of AELD as experienced by participants within responsive pedagogical environments grounded in democratic principles, with attention to country- and culture-specific contexts. It considers the multifaceted nature of transformation at both individual and collective levels as envisioned in the AECED Project Proposal: "… transformational change in participants: individual and collective growth in feelings for democracy, aesthetic awareness and qualities (such as empathic, ethical and spiritual sensibilities), collaborative, reflexive and critical capabilities, openness to newly 'seeing' the other, willingness to move towards more reflexive and critical modes of awareness and knowing that reconnecting with the body as a source of learning, and capacity to challenge social injustices and engage creatively with conflict and antagonisms" (AECED, 2022:ART B:5) and described in guiding RQ2 (AECED, 2023, p. 21).

Though the project primarily focuses on individual and collective transformations in participants, it also sought to understand whether these AELD innovations can foster deeper epistemic transformation and support broader institutional and organisational learning. Therefore, our research addressed three levels of transformation:

1. Individual and Collective Learning, as outlined in the Proposal and Methodological Framework (AECED, 2022, 2023), refers to meaningful changes in participants' thoughts, feelings, embodied awareness, and actions – both individually and as a group – when using ABE pedagogies to deepen awareness of and sensibility towards democracy-as-becoming (AECED, 2022:ART B:5; Woods et al., 2023; AECED, 2023).

2. Epistemic Transformation, as outlined in the Methodological Framework, challenges hegemonic discourses on education across various educational settings and amongst diverse participants by reimagining education for democracy (AECED, 2023, p. 10). It also refers to a significant shift in how participants, individually and collectively, understood and created knowledge through aesthetic and embodied experiences. This transformation reoriented participants away from conventional, abstract modes of knowing and toward more sensory, emotional, and creative forms of engagement. While epistemic transformation overlaps with individual and collective learning, it is distinct from its focus on the nature of knowing itself. It does not simply reflect new learning content, but rather a new way of learning, where affect, embodiment, and aesthetics are not peripheral but

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central to democratic engagement and leadership development. (Dewey, 1934; Greene, 1995; Woods et al., 2023).

3. Organisational and Institutional Transformation involves challenging the self-understanding and habits of educational organisations and institutions. From an organisational education perspective, it also addresses the learning that occurs within, of, and between organisations (Göhlich et al., 2018). Here, democracy-as-becoming is not just viewed as 'content' in different learning opportunities but as a paradigm shift within institutions. Transformational change towards democracy in organisations relates to social, economic, and political levels (AECED, 2023, pp. 10-11; Helfrich & Bollier, 2019).

For clarity and convenience, the key features describing the conditions under which the cases were conducted in each educational phase are summarised in Figure 4.

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VEN Approach	Transformational Focus	Contextual Enablers/Barriers
Early Years and Primary Education - Croatia (Cases 1 and 2), Portugal (Cases 14 and 15)		
Embodied, Narrative (Croatia – Cases 1 and 2) Visual, Narrative (Portugal – Cases 14 and 15)	Democratic values, Empowerment, Empathy, Inclusion, Democratic co-creation, Feeling of democracy, Democratic praxis	Portugal: Community values supported AELD; Croatia: Time and curriculum rigidities
Secondary Education - Latvia (Cases 11-13), UK (Case 19)		
Visual, Embodied, Narrative (Latvia – Cases 12 and 13; UK – Case 19)	Openness to newly 'seeing' the other, Dialogic and Relational Disposition, Dialogic Engagement, Democratic sensibility	Latvia: School reform context supported AELD UK: Institutional accountability pressures
Higher Education - Croatia (Cases 3 and 4), Finland (Case 5), Germany (Cases 7 and 10)		
Visual, Embodied, Narrative (Croatia - Case 3) Narrative (Croatia - Case 4) Visual, Embodied (Finland - Case 5) Visual (Germany - Case 7) Embodied (Germany - Case 10)	Reflexivity, Ethical Pedagogy, Embodied Awareness, Professional Identity	Finland and Germany: Student-centred pedagogies Croatia: Hierarchical resistance
Adult, Professional and Organisational Learning - Finland (Case 6), Germany (Cases 8-10), Latvia (Case 12), Portugal (Cases 16 and 17), UK (Case 18)		
Visual, Embodied (Finland - Case 6) Visual (Germany - Cases 8 and 9) Embodied (Germany - Case 10) Visual, Embodied, Narrative (Latvia - Case 12; UK - Case 18) Visual, Narrative (Portugal - Cases 16 and 17)	Organisational Change, Commoning, Identity Reformation, Critical Reflection, Epistemic Transformation, Openness to Newly 'Seeing' the Other, Democratic Sensibility	Finland and Portugal: Withdraws from the research Germany, UK: Institutional constraints Latvia: School reform context supported AELD

Figure 4: Key Features and Conditions of the Cases in Each Educational Phase

Despite the diversity of key VEN approaches employed, the transformational focus, and the institutional and contextual enablers and barriers shaped by educational phase, country, and culturally rooted experiences of democracy – all cases shared several common features:

- Creating a responsive pedagogical environment and actively engaging in it, collaborating with research participants.
- Applying AELD innovation that supports the experience of democracy-as-becoming.
- Grounding the research in PAR and implementing its phases across all cases.
- Achieving a shared sense of enthusiasm and commitment amongst research partners, driven by a collective desire to engage in meaningful research activities.

The following sub-sections will now provide an overview of transformation as experienced by participants in the AECED project. It begins with intra-phase cross-case analysis by each educational phase, which is followed by an inter-phase cross-case analysis.

2.3.1. Transformations in Participants of Early Years and Primary Education

Participants in this phase were early years and primary school teachers from Croatia (Cases 1 and 2) and Portugal (Cases 14 and 15). The use of ABE pedagogies, such as storytelling, drawing, photography, collective choreography, mural painting and drama across this phase led to notable transformations in how teachers engaged with democratic values, teaching practices, and co-creative pedagogies. These methods aligned well with Portugal's collaborative, inclusion-oriented educational culture. In contrast, Croatia's more hierarchical structures made embodied approaches, such as drama and role-play, both impactful and, at times, more challenging to implement. Despite differences in context and emphasis, several shared patterns of transformation emerged, underscoring the transformative potential of AELD.

Across the Portuguese and Croatian cases, AELD methods positively influenced democratic engagement, although each case demonstrated distinct approaches. In the Portuguese Cases 14 and 15, participants engaged deeply with democratic values, supported by embodied methods and a strong focus on co-creation and ownership of teaching practices. For example, in those cases, a dance workshop proved to be a powerful tool for exploring concepts of power and dialogue through movement. This experience enabled participants to physically sense inclusion and exclusion, thereby deepening their empathy and understanding of social dynamics. In the Croatian Case 1, participants experienced a shift in democratic engagement, characterised by increased responsibility and dialogue, which in turn influenced their personal identity and teaching approaches. A teacher from Case 1 concluded:

> "…The project brought me some insights, or rather some name that I have and possess within myself. Especially these last two days, my conclusion about democracy is that like everything else we try to develop amongst people, it is necessary for us to be together, to think and talk. Nothing can be done without

> spending time, talking, getting to know each other and including emotions in it. All democratic values will then be much easier to adopt…"

In the Croatian Case 2, empowerment was achieved through embodied and narrative methods, fostering inclusion, empathy, and strong co-creation, with collaborative learning being notably enhanced.

The shared patterns of transformation across the cases were:

- Democratic Engagement: All cases emphasised democratic engagement as a central outcome. Participants in each case developed a deeper understanding of democratic principles, including inclusivity, responsibility, and dialogue.
- Co-creation: In every case, the co-creation of learning activities was a key element in the transformation, as reflected in Section 2.3: Co-creation.
- Empowerment: Empowerment in pedagogical design, achieved through co-creation, emerged as a key theme, with participants feeling empowered by designing and implementing their democratic learning activities.
- Impact of AELD Innovation: The AELD innovations, applying aesthetic and embodied pedagogies and learning opportunities for democracy, were reported to have a positive influence on participants' embodied understanding of democracy, particularly fostered through ABE pedagogies such as drama, storytelling, and visual activities. Rather than solely enhancing cognitive comprehension, these methods supported a felt sense of what democracy means in practice.
- Transformative Reflection: Across all cases, both individual and collective reflection played a crucial role in the learning process, enabling participants to critically examine their teaching practices and personal experiences related to democratic values. This theme points to a form of transformation characterised by an increased predisposition toward aesthetic and embodied reflection, where participants not only think about democracy cognitively but engage with it through its lived, affective, and sensory dimensions.

While the overall impact of the AELD innovation was positive, the research identified some limitations. In the Croatian Case 2, some teachers expressed concerns about embodied methods, questioning their practicality within rigid curricula and limited timeframes. One of them voiced this doubt, asking, "We do not have time for that. When will I use this in class?" Portuguese Cases 14 and 15 highlighted technological limitations, underscoring the need for improved digital infrastructure to the online delivery of AELD training for educators. Institutional and systemic barriers, such as insufficient support for democratic pedagogy and resistance to non-traditional methods, were reported in both Croatia (Case 1) and Portugal (Cases 14 and 15).

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Together, these cases demonstrate that the AELD innovations, applying aesthetic and embodied pedagogies and learning opportunities for democracy, led to significant transformations amongst Croatian and Portuguese teachers. These outcomes are closely tied to distinct cultural and national contexts. For instance, in Croatia, the lack of a standardised approach to developing civic competencies means that teacher motivation and personal commitment largely determine the quality of democratic education (Pažur, 2023). This reliance on individual interest often coincides with teachers feeling unqualified, especially regarding politically sensitive topics such as human rights (Schultz et al., 2016; Spajić-Vrkaš et al., 2016). Institutional constraints, including rigid curricula and limited professional autonomy, hinder the adoption of embodied and participatory democratic approaches. Teachers' capacities to foster democracy are further influenced by subject specialisation, employment status, years of experience, and collegial networks.

In Portugal, structural and cultural inequalities limit inclusive participation in democratic decision-making in schools, particularly marginalising artistic and embodied subjects. Yet, participants reported relatively inclusive institutional cultures with collaborative decision-making practices that promote belonging and equity, suggesting pockets of positive democratic praxis even within restrictive systems. Despite contextual barriers, teachers deepened their understanding of democratic values, strengthened collaboration, and adopted a co-creation approach.

2.3.2. Transformations in Participants of Secondary Education

The participants in the Secondary Education phase included teachers, school principals, and students from Latvia (Cases 11–13), as well as a teacher-participant from the UK (Case 19). Both educators and students underwent epistemic, affective, and embodied transformations, transitioning from traditional cognitive learning modes to experiential and embodied practices. As participants embraced democratic values, they grew emotionally, rethought their professional roles, and became more ethically aware. In Latvia, embodied and visual methods (collage and drama sketch) aligned with national reforms of the Skola2030 reform agenda (LAPAS, 2022) and helped participants to become open to newly 'seeing' the other through dialogic and intergenerational learning. In the UK, visual and narrative methods were employed creatively, despite institutional constraints, supporting relational depth and renewed democratic engagement within the classroom, as well as a shift in what was perceived as a renewal of professional identity.

Epistemic transformation was a prominent theme in this educational phase, referring to a shift in the nature of knowing, from abstract forms to more aesthetic and embodied ways of engaging with knowledge. In the UK Case 19, the teacher used the Prototype Pedagogical Framework and Guide to reimagine practice in line with the democratic values of equity, freedom and responsiveness. In Latvia (Cases 11–13), the AELD innovation, which applied aesthetic and embodied pedagogies to support democratic learning, challenged traditional cognition-centred approaches and encouraged a turn toward sensory and emotional modes of understanding. This

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shift contributed to the development of more holistic and experiential teaching practices. A teacher in the Latvian Case 13 reflected on this epistemic shift when observing students adopting another's perspective, an experience that deepened emotional resonance and understanding through embodied, affective engagement:

> "When the girls switched roles at the last moment, I could truly see things from each character's perspective. I felt what they were experiencing, which deepened my understanding of their viewpoints. Observing their willingness to embrace each other's roles and emotions highlighted their capacity for empathy. It was a powerful reminder of how stepping into someone else's shoes can profoundly enhance our connection to others' experiences."

Affective transformation emerged as greater openness and empathy amongst both students and teachers. In Latvia (Cases 11–13), this included enhanced perspective-taking and relational dispositions grounded in mutual listening and reflexivity. Case 13 particularly illustrated how intergenerational learning in a secondary school, including different components of the institution, developed through dialogic exchanges. In Case 19, a seasoned teacher regained emotional connection to democratic values and found courage to try ABE pedagogies, despite institutional challenges.

Embodied transformation was also evident across cases. In Case 11, movement and artistic expression reshaped students' thinking. In Case 12, teachers learned to trust their bodily intuition. Case 13 highlighted how physical-emotional engagement facilitated empathy and inclusive collaboration. In the UK case, there was a noticeable shift from teacher-centred control to a shared, embodied learning space, where the teacher worked alongside students rather than in front of them.

Overall, holistic transformational changes at cognitive, affective, and embodied levels took place across all cases, reflected shifts in the six ONSO components, varying by participant group. Learners reimagined educational possibilities (cognitive), deepened empathy and openness (affective), and embraced physical, sensory engagement as core to learning (embodied), together enabling a holistic rethinking of teaching and learning.

Participants demonstrated increased cognitive flexibility, deeper empathy, and embraced sensory and relational learning. For example, a Latvian Case 11 student shared their experience on an enhanced level of their interpersonal adaptability and ONSO owing to a drama sketch:

> "… Perhaps the most surprising discovery for me was realising that I can collaborate effectively with peers I didn't usually work with, and even with those I didn't particularly like before. During this project, I found myself working not only with my friends but also with some new colleagues. Before, I hadn't even paid attention to

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> that boy, but now I'd be happy to work with him again because I know I can trust him. He turned out to be smart, reliable, and very pleasant to talk to."

This reflection highlights the participant's growing ability to recognise and value diverse perspectives, moving beyond initial impressions or social groupings. It illustrates how engagement in collaborative aesthetic and embodied learning fosters empathy and reduces preconceived biases.

Renewal and deepening of democratic sensibility were the key outcomes across all cases. In Latvia, students and teachers began to engage with others more ethically and reflexively. Case 12 highlighted teachers' growth in ethical sensitivity and self-awareness, while Case 13 showed how both students and teachers began to see each other anew, breaking down traditional hierarchies. In Case 11, students shifted from passive learner positions to co-creators of democratic knowledge through the AELD innovations.

Teachers reconnected with their values and beliefs, even within rigid systems. Pedagogical shifts often began subtly, building confidence and clarity over time. Classrooms became more collaborative and democratic, with shared power, fluid leadership roles, and greater mutual respect. AELD innovation also reshaped hierarchical relationships, as seen in Case 13, fostering co-creative intergenerational learning. Similarly, in Case 19, relational well-being and power-sharing enhanced joy and creativity in teacher-student dynamics.

Professional identity and leadership shifts were particularly marked in the UK case, where the teacher used AELD innovations to rediscover a more authentic professional identity, moving away from system-imposed performative models. The PAR experience created space to reframe their role in line with democratic values. In Latvia, while such identity shifts were less explicitly stated, school leaders began to rethink professional autonomy, recognising the need for flexible, community-based learning environments in their institutions that support AELD.

Despite these shared transformations, differing views on AELD's feasibility emerged. The UK Case 19 reflected caution and concerns about institutional constraints, with the participant acknowledging the courage needed to depart from conventional frameworks. This was highlighted by the research participant, who reflected on how incorporating ABE pedagogies into lessons might be perceived by the senior leadership team:

> "... if senior leaders walked in and saw collage, or dare I say a drama script in a (yeah), particularly the collage. They might get their head round about the drama script bit, I guess, but I don't know whether... And then they would come [to a student] and say 'so, tell me, what's your, what are you doing? What are you learning today? How's this link to the learning objective?' That's what scares. That's the scary bit of this project."

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By contrast, Latvian research (Cases 11-13) demonstrated more optimism, supported by alignment with the Skola2030 reform agenda (LAPAS, 2022), which actively promotes civic engagement and democratic participation. Latvian participants saw AELD innovation as adaptable to both curricular and extracurricular contexts.

Building on these insights, the Secondary Education phase revealed holistic transformations among teachers and students in the UK and Latvia, encompassing cognitive flexibility, emotional empathy, and embodied learning.

These outcomes are closely tied to distinct cultural and national contexts. For instance, Latvia's secondary education landscape reveals an evolving but still fragile incorporation of aesthetic and embodied learning. Teachers who had been in the profession for longer, in particular, tend to exhibit lower democratic openness, affecting the relational dynamics in classrooms.

The UK Secondary Education context is marked by a crisis in teacher morale and systemic deprioritisation of the arts (Towers et al., 2022; Tambling & Bacon, 2024), which undermines opportunities for aesthetic and embodied learning. This broader policy environment restricts the potential for a more democratic approach to education, highlighting the influence of macro-political pressures on pedagogical possibilities.

Despite challenges in navigating institutional frameworks, participants overall demonstrated an increased ONSO and a deepened democratic sensibility. These shifts, supported by context-sensitive leadership and policy alignment in Latvia, highlight AELD's potential to nurture democratic, relational learning communities that value diverse perspectives and shared ethical engagement.

2.3.3. Transformations in Participants of Higher Education

The participants in this educational phase included university teachers, students, postdoctoral researchers, and supervisors from Croatia (Cases 3 and 4), Finland (Case 5) and Germany (Cases 7 and 10). They developed heightened emotional and embodied self-awareness, often working through discomfort. In Finland and Germany, embodied and visual methods such as movement, drawing and PLC, were well-supported by student-centred academic cultures. These catalysed critical reflections and new perceptions of agency, enabling more confident democratic dialogue and civic engagement. In contrast, Croatia faced cultural resistance to embodied learning, which limited its impact despite isolated cases of profound transformation.

The ABE methods fostered curiosity, empathy, and respect in all five cases. These experiential approaches helped participants to connect emotionally and cognitively with AECED's core democratic principles and values (see Section 2.1). This was particularly evident in Finland (Case 5) and Germany (Cases 7 and 10), where participants described how bodily awareness and group-based trust-building created a more personal and relational experience of democracy.

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A recurring insight across Croatia (Cases 3 and 4), Finland (Case 5), and Germany (Case 7 and 10) was the importance of collaborative meaning-making, closely aligned with theme of Co-creation, as discussed in Section 2.3. Participants learned most effectively when they had space to reflect together, whether to unpack symbolic movement, share emotional reactions, or debate democratic dilemmas. This collaboration deepened their understanding of democracy and strengthened engagement with ABE methods.

Emotional readiness to engage in ABE methods significantly influenced participation. Feelings of shame, awkwardness, or discomfort were common, especially when participants were asked to perform physically or engage in close, embodied interactions, as in Croatia, Finland, and Germany (Cases 4, 5, and 10). These barriers were often addressed by building trust within the group, starting with simple movements, and allowing participants to progress at their own pace. A participant from Case 4 in Croatia emphasised the effect of aesthetic and embodied methods:

> "…using those methods with democracy issues gives you the feeling that there are no prejudices in the group, and that everything could be settled with dialogue and positive approach…"

In Germany (Case 10), students who initially felt exposed came to value simplicity and authenticity in movement, reframing their expectations and experiencing a shift in self-perception regarding education, which they criticised as too conventional and conservative, arguing that higher education should better support personal development and individual experience and perspective.

An open attitude was key to overcoming initial resistance and engaging more deeply with AELD practices. In Cases 5 and 10 (Finland and Germany) openness enabled participants to move from discomfort to personal insight, helping them to recognise how embodied reactions, emotional histories, and social experiences shaped their democratic participation.

Distinct patterns of transformation emerged across the cases. In Croatia (Cases 3, 4), participants reflected critically on their professional identity and roles in fostering an environment that supports democracy-as-becoming. In Finland (Case 5), embodiment brought structural issues such as inequality and oppression into personal and deeply felt focus. In Germany (Cases 7 and 10), AELD innovation created unique spaces for deeper relationships and emotional connections within regulated institutional structures, allowing students to work together to create democratic learning environments. Despite challenges in familiarising participants with ABE methods, a participant from Germany (Case 7) captured this experience, noting:

> "The path to democracy is very rocky and exhausting, but with Pattern Language of Commoning, it can become a little easier to walk the path."

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The student's reflection captures the challenges inherent in practicing democracy, describing it as 'rocky and exhausting'. However, it also highlights how the PLC cards offer practical guidance that helps ease this difficult journey and practice democracy as a lived experience. By providing a structured, relatable approach to fostering cooperation, shared responsibility, and collective decision-making, the PLC cards supported the students' journey in the seminar setting, making democracy more than just an abstract ideal or theory. This insight underscores how ABE methods, such as PLC cards, can empower and encourage participants to navigate the becoming process more confidently and collaboratively.

In some cases, notably Croatia (Case 3) and Finland (Case 5), polarisation in views on democracy and in participant responses to AELD innovation was revealed. Differences in students' backgrounds and comfort with embodied practices highlighted the need for educators to adapt their approaches, as no single method worked for everyone. In Germany (Cases 7 and 10), the activities took place in the same institutional setting but led to different outcomes due to distinct ABE pedagogies. Case 7 employed a more structured yet co-creative approach through PLC, which supported student engagement but also revealed the persistence of institutional conditionedness. In contrast, Case 10 adopted more open, creative, and embodied methods, which proved particularly effective in fostering deeper learning and overcoming students' internalised institutional barriers.

Non-verbal communication and regulation were also highlighted. In Finland and Germany, the significance of AG (Case 5) and being protected from others' gaze in movement (Case 10) as well as the role of touch and atmosphere, were emphasised. Teachers and facilitators who responded sensitively to these cues supported learners' engagement and emotional safety.

Taken together, the Higher Education findings demonstrated that AELD innovation has significant potential to transform individual, relational, and institutional understandings of democracy. Their impact depends heavily on emotional safety, group trust, contextual awareness, and institutional flexibility, which were highlighted above in Section 2.3. When applied with sensitivity and openness, AELD supports a powerful reimagining of democracy not just as theory, but as an embodied, lived, and shared journey of becoming.

These outcomes are closely tied to distinct cultural and national contexts. At Croatian universities, traditional teaching methods prevail, often based on instructors' personal educational histories rather than evidence-based pedagogical innovation (Ledić et al., 2011). Students express dissatisfaction with limited opportunity to engage in power sharing, one of the dimensions of holistic democracy (see Section 2.1). Nevertheless, engagement with AELD approaches sparked some student motivation towards democratising higher education, suggesting untapped potential for transformative practices despite systemic inertia.

In Finland, teachers and students expressed a desire for more collective power-sharing and responsibility in learning, though students often still defer to perceived hierarchical knowledge

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holders. Smaller, more intimate groups facilitate democratic, trusting learning environments, indicating the importance of group dynamics in embodying democratic ideals.

Germany's academic culture encouraged students to see themselves as active participants and future professionals. Here, AELD introduces novel opportunities for democracy-as-becoming through the ABE methods and PAR. However, students faced time constraints and academic pressures that may limit social engagement and reflection.

2.3.4. Transformations in Participants of Adult, Professional, and Organisational Learning

Participants of this phase were professionals, counsellors, educators, and activists from Finland (Case 6), Germany (Cases 8-10), Latvia (Case 12), Portugal (Cases 16 and 17), and UK (Case 18). The research findings demonstrated that participants experienced deep integration of democratic values into their professional identities, cultivating emotional intelligence, ethical sensitivity, and trust in embodied learning as a source of insight. For example, in Germany (Cases 7 and 8), participants navigated and transformed institutional constraints using pedagogical methods such as Future-Pattern Labs, PLC cards, and metaphors; and in the UK (Case 18) through collage, and creative reflection. In Latvia (Case 12), collage and drama sketches supported participants to connect emotionally with democratic learning – an approach aligned with current educational reforms.

Across the five countries – Finland (Case 6), Germany (Cases 8-10), Latvia (Case 12), Portugal (Cases 16 and 17), and the UK (Case 18) – participants experienced profound transformations in their democratic sensibilities and professional identities through the AELD trials. These trials catalysed deepened feelings for democracy by enabling participants to rethink power dynamics and authority in their professional relationships. In particular, the UK doctoral supervisors (Case 18) described how AELD fostered relational and embodied understandings of democracy, prompting them to re-evaluate their supervisory styles and embrace more horizontal, co-creative relationships. Similarly, teachers and supervisors in Finland, Portugal, and the UK (Cases 6, 16, 17, 18) reported overcoming personal insecurities and gaining confidence in using embodied methods to promote more democratic and less hierarchical dynamics in their educational practices. In some cases, these shifts extended beyond the curriculum, as teachers found themselves designing their own AELD activities, further solidifying identity-level transformations in Finland, Latvia and the UK (Cases 6, 12, 18). Sources such as the AG (Case 6) in Finland and the PLC cards (Cases 8 and 9) in Germany opened up new ways to navigate and reflect on power relationships.

The PLC cards were used in Germany (explicitly in Cases 8, 9) to intervene on institutionalised power dynamics within teams and leadership structures. In particular, the cards of 'social togetherness' were used for positioning oneself in the room and then co-reflecting on the feelings and perspectives that came along with the positioning. Participants addressed the importance of

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cultivating common intentions and values, such as contributing without constraints; carefully sharing reciprocity; trusting situated knowledge; and communicating empathetically and with self-reliance. They felt that the PLC could greatly help in addressing perceived hierarchies or in articulating team-based feelings of subalternity.

The AG in Finland (Case 6) evoked profound feelings of liberation for participants, both when they were the recipients of such acceptance and when practising it towards others. It created a space where new possibilities could emerge, allowing individuals to experience themselves and others in a new way. Being under others' AG was often described as a healing and grounding sensation, providing permission to be exactly as one was in the moment, without fear of judgment.

Transformation was not only individual but also collective. Across these cases, participation in the AECED Project nurtured democratic growth through shared learning, mentoring, and dialogue. Mentoring sessions and discussions during the courses in Finland and Latvia (Cases 6 and 12) became spaces of transformative dialogue, while collective experimentation and workshops led to innovative, collaborative implementations of AELD in all cases in this phase. In Latvia, Germany, and Finland (Cases 6, 8, 9, 12), participants highlighted how these processes nurtured solidarity and sustained professional dialogue beyond the immediate course. A shared desire for rituals of togetherness and respect for difference emerged in these settings, pointing to the relational foundation of democratic co-creation. In this context, a participant from Latvia (Case 12) reflected on their experience of collaboration with peers:

> "I noticed, especially during the creation of our group's collage, that I gave space to my teammates to lead when I saw their ideas were more valuable than mine. I took the lead when inspiration struck me, and others liked my ideas. Surprisingly, we didn't quarrel at all."

Central to this transformation was the cultivation of aesthetic and embodied skills. Across all cases, the AELD innovation enabled participants to connect sensory, emotional, movement, and cognitive dimensions of knowing. Movement exercises in Finland and Germany (Cases 6 and 9) became powerful sites of reflection, while ABE approaches surfaced tacit knowledge and fostered deep relational awareness in Finland, Germany, Latvia and the UK (Cases 6, 8, 9, 12, 18). In some cases, these methods prompted reflection on managing the challenging aspects of professional work, as seen in Finland, Germany and the UK (Cases 6, 8, 18). In Germany (Case 9), the PLC card deck supported a balanced approach to emotional, rational, and reflective engagement, linking body, mind, and practice through sensory metaphors. Throughout, participants noted that engaging with the AECED Project deepened their felt sense of their emotions and reactions (e.g. Finland and Latvia: Cases 6 and 12).

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Ethical and empathic relational skills were also strengthened. The embodied AG cultivated a felt sense of democratic values by fostering self-awareness, empathy, openness, and a sense of safety in Finland (Case 6). Movement and drama exercises supported group empathy and relational trust in Finland and Latvia (Cases 6 and 12). At the same time, storytelling, visual arts, and performance-based activities in Portugal, Latvia, and the UK (Cases 12, 16, 17, 18) fostered co-creation and a more lived experience of democracy. Collaborative meaning-making and critical reflection in Finland and the UK (Cases 6, 18), closely aligned with the theme of Co-creation in Section 2.3, nurtured the democratic value of responsiveness through openness to otherness and relational adaptability, fostering a dialogic stance central to democracy-as-becoming (Latvia, Case 12). A Case 10 participant in Germany shared this experience:

> "This was the very first time that I simply wasn't nervous at all, even though everyone was watching me in a habitat, in an environment where I was not assigned to anything. And somehow, I really enjoyed the fact that there was so much irritation. And I think that was what I actually wanted to show a little bit. And what I really notice is that the more I do things that differ from what people think of me, what I do, the more people make themselves look outside their own radius."

Throughout these cases, democracy shifted from an abstract concept to a lived, embodied experience. Movement-based pedagogies made it easier for participants to understand how ABE methods could symbolically and experientially connect democratic values and practices to broader societal issues (Finland, Case 6). ABE methods in Germany, Latvia, Portugal and the UK enabled educators to embody and enact democratic values in practice (Cases 9, 16, 17, 18). In Cases 16 and 17 (Portugal), researchers observed that participants' understanding of democracy evolved over the course of the project. Initially regarded primarily as a theoretical or institutional concept, democracy came to be experienced in a more embodied and participatory way through ABE pedagogies – emphasising inclusion, active engagement, and democratic practice in everyday contexts.

In Germany (Cases 8 and 9), PLC cards were used, for instance, for participant reflection, organisational analysis, peer interviews, and co-creation of methods. They served as an epistemic boundary object (Weber, 2025) for participants and organisational stakeholders. As it allowed for a reference to a desired future practice, the PLC deck helped in reimagining institutional structures and practices (Cases 8 and 9). It supported educational innovation and organisational democracy as part of an ongoing process of transformation.

However, the 'best practice' pattern approach of the PLC cards initially confused some participants. Over time, as participants engaged more deeply with the PLC cards, they began to appreciate their potential in Germany (Cases 8 and 9). Similarly, in other cases, integrating the ABE methods into disciplines traditionally seen as distant from the arts in Finland and Latvia

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(Cases 6 and 12) or adapting AELD to the Adult, Professional, and Organisational Learning in Portugal (Cases 16 and 17) posed further challenges, making initial engagement difficult for participants.

These outcomes are closely tied to distinct cultural and national contexts. In Finland (Case 6), the co-facilitation of workshops by professionals with embodied arts expertise enriched the practical integration of AELD, highlighting the value of interdisciplinary collaboration in adult learning contexts.

Germany's cultural education professionals/co-researchers (Case 10) and multiplicators/activists in the commoning field (Case 9) actively engaged with the AELD framework, blending their organisational roles with democratic transformation efforts. Yet, tensions persist regarding the fit between grassroots commoning practices and formal democratic institutions.

Latvia (Case 12) demonstrated the feasibility of integrating ABE pedagogies into existing curricula across secondary schools, with reciprocal learning between teachers and students fostering democratic dialogue and ethical agency.

In the UK (Case 18), doctoral supervisors navigate heavy workloads, procedural constraints, and limited pedagogical training. The AECED Project offered rare and valued opportunities to explore relational, reflective supervision practices through creative ABE pedagogies, contributing to the reimagining of doctoral pedagogy as more democratic and dialogic (Kandiko Howson et al., 2022).

Despite the different contexts, the shared patterns of transformation across cases in Finland, Germany, Latvia, Portugal, and the UK reveal a powerful shift: democracy began to be experienced as a relational, embodied, and lived practice of becoming, rooted in empathy, openness, creativity, and ethical engagement. Participants across these contexts discovered new ways of learning and being that foregrounded democratic principles and values not just in theory, but in their everyday professional lives.

2.3.5. Cross-Case Analysis of Transformations Across Educational Phases

Across the four educational phases, the AELD approaches, applied within a responsive pedagogical environment and guided by the four principles of holistic democracy, demonstrated potential to transform at three levels: epistemic; individual and collective; organisational and institutional. Despite the diversity of national, institutional, and cultural contexts, these transformations appear to follow shared patterns, changes in participants' thoughts, feelings, embodied awareness, and actions, both individually and as a group, when using AELD to deepen understandings of democracy-as-becoming.

Across educational phases, AELD appeared to foster a progressive deepening of democratic sensibility – beginning with early relational and ethical awakenings amongst Early Years and Primary Education teachers in Croatia and Portugal (Cases 1, 2, 14, 15), expanding to embodied and dialogic openness in Secondary Education in Latvia, and the UK (Cases 11, 12, 13, 19), and

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culminating in reflective self-awareness and relational reimaginings in Higher Education in Croatia, Finland, and Germany (Cases 3, 4, 5, 7, 10) and Adult, Professional, and Organisational Learning in Finland, Germany, Latvia, Portugal, the UK (Cases 6, 8, 9, 10, 12, 16, 17, 18).

Transformations at the Level of Individual and Collective Learning

AELD appeared to enable cognitive flexibility and embodied knowing – participants moved beyond purely cognitive frameworks to integrate sensory, emotional, and relational modes of learning in Finland, Germany, Latvia, and the UK (Cases 6, 8, 10-13, 19). Movement-based and visual methods – collage, drama sketches, dance, mural painting and others, nurtured a dialogic and relational disposition, supporting a shift from individualistic to collective, co-creative engagement during the case trials.

The ABE methods, especially when aligned with culturally supportive environments, enabled democracy to be experienced not only as a political idea but as a lived, embodied, and relational practice.

Enhancement of key democratic sensibilities, observed across cases and deeply rooted in core democratic and ethical sensibilities such as:

- Openness to newly 'seeing' the other – emerging through collaboration with unfamiliar peers, embracing difference, and overcoming personal and cultural biases (Cases 11, 12, 13, 19).
- Democratic commitment – reflected in participants' collective agency, valuing equity, and integrating moral dimensions into teaching and learning (Cases 1, 14, 15, 19).
- Mutual listening and relational well-being – active listening and shared dialogue nurtured relational safety and trust, central to democratic practice (Cases 6, 12, 18).
- Reflexive self-awareness – participants engaged in deep self-examination of identity, emotions, and relational dynamics, catalysing individual and collective change (Cases 6, 12, 16, 18).

Across the cases, co-learning, co-creation and collaborative meaning-making emerged as a unifying thread - participants shifted from hierarchical, teacher-driven models to more participatory, dialogic spaces (Cases 6, 8, 12, 16, 18). For example, in Case 12, a student shared how they learned to let others lead when appropriate, illustrating a dynamic balance of agency and listening.

Epistemic Transformation

The Prototype Pedagogical Framework and Guides supported efforts to challenge hegemonic discourses on education across different educational settings and amongst diverse participants by reimagining education for democracy. This, in turn, confronted participants' prior perception of education.

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Embodied and sensory ways of knowing: A key insight was the emergence of embodied and sensory ways of knowing, integrating bodily awareness, emotion, and relational presence with cognitive understanding. Movement, drama, dance and artistic expression enabled participants to move beyond abstract, purely cognitive engagement with democracy and instead experience it as a lived, relational, and sensory reality.

For example, in Latvia and the UK (Secondary Education, Cases 11–13,19), drama sketches, collage creation, and narrative methods allowed participants to reimagine perspectives beyond their own, fostering deeper empathy and an expanded sense of relational ethics - an affective and embodied shift that, while not strictly epistemic, may support broader transformations in how participants engage with democratic sensibility. In Portugal and Croatia's Early Years and Primary Education (Cases 1, 2, 14, 15), teachers described how storytelling, drawing, and collective artistic activities catalysed a shift in their epistemic framing of democracy, from a disembodied, theoretical notion to one grounded in embodied practices of inclusion and co-creation.

Epistemic flexibility and cognitive shifts: Across all phases, participants reported epistemic transformations, moving from rigid, hierarchical models of knowledge transmission towards more open-ended, dialogic, and co-constructed ways of knowing. In the Higher Education and Adult, Professional, and Organisational Learning (Cases 3–10, 16–18), this was evident as participants experimented with ABE methods (e.g. Social Presencing Theatre (Hayashi, 2021), PLC card deck, drama, and collage). These methods invited participants to see beyond disciplinary or institutional boundaries and to reimagine knowledge production as a collective, relational, and iterative process.

Reframing of roles and power relations: AELD's emphasis on power-sharing prompted participants to question traditional power dynamics in learning relationships. This re-evaluation of epistemic authority, regarding who holds knowledge and how it is shared, was especially evident in the UK Case 19 and Latvian Case 13, where participants noted a shift from teacher-centred approaches to collective dialogue and the co-construction of knowledge.

Participants learned to view things from new perspectives, adopt different roles, and incorporate others' ideas, which all relate to the democratic value of responsiveness.

Integration of emotional and rational knowing: Emotional engagement was a crucial epistemic transformation in these contexts. Participants across cases reported that ABE methods allowed them to connect feeling and thinking, broadening what counts as valid knowledge.

In Finland (Case 6), participants reflected on how the AG, and in Germany (Cases 8, 9, 10), other embodied practices helped to connect thinking with feeling. This challenged the notion that emotions and rational thinking should be kept separate in professional and educational contexts. In Case 6 (Finland), the synthesis of findings and the researcher's interpretation highlighted how the AG enabled participants to perceive one another as a whole body and through one's whole

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body. This was described as an opening up to see, sense, and be with others through all the senses.

Sustained epistemic transformation: from theory to practice: Despite the variations in national and institutional contexts, such as hierarchical, exam-driven systems in Croatia versus more student-centred practices in Finland, participants across cases expressed that AELD helped them operationalise democratic ideals in educational practice not just as abstract goals but as practical, lived ways of knowing. This shift was apparent in contexts with supportive cultural and policy frameworks (i.e. Latvia's Skola2030 agenda), which enabled participants to sustain epistemic transformation and embed it in their practice.

Across all cases and educational phases, AELD supported epistemic transformations. The research demonstrated that participants began to explore more relational, embodied, and co-created forms of education. This shift encompassed:

- Cognitive flexibility and appreciation of diverse perspectives.
- Integration of emotional, sensory, and embodied experiences as valid ways of knowing.
- Emergence of dialogic, democratic epistemic frameworks that challenge hierarchies and promote co-creation.
- Experiencing democracy-as-becoming not as an abstract ideal or theory but as an experiential and lived process.
- A growing comfort with ambiguity as well as uncertainty as essential conditions for learning and growth.

The epistemic transformation reflects on the potential of AELD innovation to reimagine education as a site of democratic co-creation and relational, lived knowing – a foundational step in transforming not only practices but also the deeper understandings of what it means to teach, learn, and lead democratically.

Sparks of Organisational and Institutional Transformation

Organisational and Institutional Transformation means rethinking how organisations and institutions (e.g. schools, universities) see themselves and operate. It is not just about teaching democracy**,** it's about shifting the culture and practices of the organisation itself. In education settings, it proposes moving beyond individual learning to collective learning in, by, and between organisations from an organisational education perspective (Göhlich et al., 2018). Democracy-as-becoming becomes a core part of the organisation's structure, not just a topic. Central to this are relational practices, such as active listening, empathy, and shared decision-making, that foster trust and inclusiveness, laying the groundwork for more profound democratic transformation.

Across all cases, there were some sparks of organisational and institutional change:

- Emergence of new relational practices: In several cases, participants began to view their roles and responsibilities differently; teachers, supervisors, and facilitators experimented

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with more democratic and horizontal dynamics. For instance, in Finland and Germany within the Higher Education and Adult, Professional, and Organisational Learning phases (Cases 5, 6, 7, 9, 10), democratic experimentation was seen as a relational practice, typically emerging within specific groups or initiatives rather than transforming the entire institution.

- Seeds of cultural change: The AG in Finland (Case 6), for instance, created safe, inclusive spaces that challenged traditional power hierarchies, echoing a small but meaningful cultural shift in how learning relationships are understood. In the UK (Case 18), supervisors reflected on how these relational practices began to challenge hierarchical norms in doctoral supervision.
- Co-creation and participatory practices: The co-creative processes and collective experimentation within AELD trials fostered small-scale changes in organisational cultures, such as new rituals of shared reflection (e.g. Cases 7, 8, 9 in Germany) and more participatory lesson planning (e.g. Cases 14 and 15 in Portugal).
- Participatory impulses for institutional change: In Case 8 (Germany), a PLC–Future Lab approach was trialled. This approach supported both team development and organisational analysis. Such Labs allow transformational impulses for broader organisational changes. Two organisations from the field of social work were involved. In both cases, participants were deeply engaged with the change they wanted to bring into their organisations. In both organisations, the approach of the PLC Future-Pattern Lab was repeated in a self-organised manner.

The AECED Project focused primarily on grassroots-level innovation, based on the principle that meaningful transformation often emerges from bottom-up initiatives rather than top-down institutional reform. While the project did not aim, nor possess the resources, to directly affect systemic, institution-wide change, the research generated valuable insights into the barriers and facilitators of organisational transformation within educational settings.

Reported by many partners, including Croatia, Finland, Germany, Portugal, and the UK, most organisational shifts remained small-scale interventions constrained by institutional inertia, rigid curricula, accountability frameworks, and conservative educational cultures. In these contexts, transformation was often tentative and evolving.

In contrast, the Latvian context, supported by the national Skola2030 reform agenda, provided more favourable conditions for embedding democratic values and principles institutionally. The Latvian Cases (11–13) highlighted the effectiveness of a holistic, whole-school approach that actively engaged school principals, teachers, students, and external stakeholders (such as experts in education, culture, and psychology) as equal partners throughout the AELD trials. This collective engagement was essential for fostering sustained organisational learning and enabling collaborative decision-making on long-term implementation strategies.

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These findings underscore that transforming education for democracy requires educational institutions to operate as dynamic, learning organisations, embedding change across multiple levels. The Latvian cases offer valuable lessons for policy and practice that resonate with broader EU priorities for inclusive, democratic, and participatory education systems.

AELD supported participants – and in some cases, small parts of their organisations – in engaging more authentically with democratic principles. These grassroots-level shifts, though modest, demonstrate the potential for democratic values to be more deeply experienced and shared within educational communities. This suggests that democracy can be nurtured not only as an abstract ideal or curriculum topic but as a lived, collective practice embedded in everyday interactions and relationships.

Summary

Across all cases, our research suggests that AELD has the potential to foster three levels of transformation: First, individual and collective transformation, participants moved beyond cognitive learning to embrace embodied and relational practices, cultivating openness, empathy, and a democratic sensibility that included cognitive flexibility, ethical growth, and collaborative meaning-making. Second, epistemic transformations were observed, where participants' understanding of knowledge and learning expanded to integrate embodied, emotional, and cognitive ways of knowing. This broader perspective seemed to open participants to ambiguity, difference, and collective agency, supporting a reimagining of democracy as a lived, relational practice. Third, at the organisational and institutional level, small-scale experimental practices were noted, including the introduction of new relational approaches, shared leadership roles, inclusive spaces, and co-creation processes that challenged traditional hierarchies. While these interventions planted seeds of potential cultural change, further research is needed to explore their longer-term impact and sustainability.

2.4. Cross-Case Themes and Reflections

This section presents the thematic findings from the cross-case analysis in response to guiding RQs 1 and 3, examining what was revealed in the cases about the process of engaging with the Prototype Pedagogical Framework and Guides, and how this engagement, alongside the design and trialling of AELD, was experienced by participants. The conclusions are presented through the main themes that emerged through successive stages of cross-case analysis. These themes also reflect findings related to the role that researchers played in the process, as well as in the design and trialling of AELD by participants. The section begins with a short reflection on the PAR process and how it has shaped analysis.

In the AECED Project, the PAR process refers not merely to the steps taken to gather data, but to a dynamic, iterative, and collaborative cycle of reflection, action, and transformation that actively involves participants as co-researchers. Rather than treating participants as subjects, PAR emphasises their agency and experiential knowledge, fostering mutual learning and collective

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inquiry (Reason & Bradbury, 2008). The PAR process unfolds through repeated cycles of identifying issues, planning and implementing actions, reflecting on outcomes, and refining strategies. This recursive structure enables both individual and systemic change, as participants critically examine their realities and work towards meaningful co-growth.

The data analysis and case comparison went beyond simply comparing conclusions or identifying similarities and differences across the nineteen cases. Our aim was to understand the underlying meanings – relational, contextual, and political – embedded in what participants said, demonstrated, and experienced, and to connect these insights with broader educational and political paradigms. Through this analytical process, nine themes were identified.

These themes represent core features of the process across all nineteen cases. To elaborate on the themes, illustrative examples from the data analysis reported in D4.4 are provided. These examples aim to deepen understanding of each theme's meaning, highlight the diverse ways in which they manifested in the cases, and show how the themes were evident across all phases of education. In the following subsections, the themes of liberatory pedagogy; blended roles; moving beyond; disrupting conventional linear time; institutional barriers and constraints; tensions; safe space; engagement and curiosity; and co-creation are discussed.

2.4.1. Liberatory Pedagogy

A liberatory pedagogy is manifested as a transformative movement through which participants – often situated within visible and invisible barriers at both personal and institutional levels—begin to see, speak, and act differently. Drawing on Paulo Freire's (1970) theory of liberation, transformation is not something delivered from above, but something that must be co-created through critical dialogue, reflection, and embodied engagement. Freire argues that liberation occurs when individuals become aware of the conditions of their oppression and develop the agency to act upon that awareness. ABE methods, by engaging the body, imagination, and emotion, facilitate this process by allowing participants to momentarily step into new roles, voices, and stories – enabling them to experience alternative realities in which they are more focused, more confident, and more empowered to resist oppression (Boler, 1999). These embodied moments open spaces for participants to recognise and confront the social, emotional, and political constraints that shape their lived experiences. This potential for liberatory transformation resonates with democratic practices that seek to challenge rigid hierarchies and inequalities. In this context, play can serve as a generative space that temporarily suspends rigid hierarchies and inequalities, creating conditions for new ways of being and relating (Koubová et al., 2022). Yet while the project cases revealed this promise of liberatory pedagogy – and in some instances it was meaningfully realised – it is also important to acknowledge that certain systemic inequalities remained untouched. The process opened possibilities for change, but it could not fully dismantle all forms of marginalisation embedded in broader socio-political structures.

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This liberatory dynamic was clearly visible in several cases. In Case 19 (UK), a teacher described how relinquishing control in the classroom created an unexpected sense of freedom for students:

> "I enjoyed it because I didn't feel I was in charge [...] I got the impression they've not had this freedom [...] for a long time."

Similarly, in Case 18 (UK), a participant explained how ABE practices helped make abstract democratic ideals emotionally and physically real:

> "Sometimes when you record a particular episode of your life experience [...] it speaks to you emotionally and physically [...] you actually understand it a bit better."

These testimonies reflect Freire's notion of dialogical empowerment, where liberation occurs through collective recognition and shared meaning-making.

The theme of liberation through co-created pedagogy was also evident in Portugal (Cases 14–17), where play-based ABE practices were used to support children in articulating their perspectives, experiencing power-sharing, and developing a deeper understanding of societal structures. Likewise, in Latvia (Cases 11–13), teachers and students engaged in democracy-related problem-solving through collage and drama sketches, creating spaces to express emotions, reconsider traditional teaching and learning approaches, and explore agency. In Croatian Case 4, students highlighted that by listening to each other they felt more motivated to be a part of a change, and to express their thoughts more confidently, even in the spaces where they felt a risk for speaking up because of existing hierarchies.

AELD enables participants to experience what it feels like not to be oppressed – a process cultivated through the co-construction of education that values relationality, responsiveness, and shared authority. In Case 5 (Finland), for example, participants described the use of reciprocal aesthetic gestures as creating a tangible sense of freedom – to move, speak, and express without fear of judgment. Such experiences resonate with Freire's (1970, 2005) vision of education as the practice of freedom, grounded in the capacity to imagine, dialogue, and act beyond conditions of constraint. They resonate too with a vision of the new sensibility required for democracy, explored by Kennedy (Kennedy, D., 2022, p. 191), which is fostered through dialogic "educational play". Such dialogic play, argues Kennedy, involves "the reconstruction of power as fluid, group-negotiated and revisable" (2022, p. 198). In other words, integral to the principle of transforming dialogue is participants' activation of the principle of power-sharing, key principle underpinning the AECED conception of democracy-as-becoming (see Section 2.1).

Across the project, AELD was employed as a pedagogy of liberation, aiming to use ABE methods to dismantle hierarchical structures and cultivate voice, agency, and the potential for transformation at emotional, relational, and structural levels. While this was an overarching goal, it was achieved to varying degrees across different contexts.

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2.4.2. Blended Roles

Blended roles emerge as a defining feature of AELD where researchers, participants, educators, and learners dynamically shift roles in response to relational, contextual, and emotional conditions. The boundaries between these roles are fluid and porous, reflecting the core principles of PAR, which views all actors as co-creators of knowledge rather than as passive recipients (Reason & Bradbury, 2008; Fine, 2008). This relational approach challenges conventional educational hierarchies, fostering dialogical, reflective praxis and reciprocal learning.

Researchers, like educators, are not detached observers but engaged with co-participants who inhabit intermediate and evolving roles – facilitators, creative collaborators, critical friends, and witnesses. Their engagement extends beyond spoken or written contributions to include embodied presence, silence, gestures, and attunement to collective movement and emotion. Similarly, learners and participants are positioned not as subjects to be taught or studied, but as knowledgeable agents whose lived experiences and insights shape the learning and research process. This mutual engagement reflects the ethos of "witnessing and co-struggling" often described in PAR (Cahill, 2007; Kindon et al., 2007), and demands ongoing reflexivity about power, positionality, and emotional entanglements.

In AELD, educators must navigate the tensions between guiding and co-learning, remaining attuned to institutional structures, historical dynamics, and interpersonal relations. The process is inherently dialogic and co-constructed, requiring a shift from fixed roles to a more fluid choreography of shared inquiry and transformation.

These complex role negotiations are evident across multiple project cases, highlighting the dynamic and fluid nature of relationships shaped by hybrid roles that span researcher, participant, educator, and learner positions within AELD. In Cases 5 and 6 (Finland), researchers fully embodied blended roles, moving seamlessly between facilitators, co-learners, instructors, and students, within higher education seminars such as 'Work Counselling as Embodied Dialogue'. At times, one researcher would act as a student while another facilitated; in other sessions, both took on the roles of co-learners and instructors. This fluidity not only disrupted traditional academic hierarchies but also fostered reciprocal learning and deeper co-creation. Similar dynamics emerged in individual mentoring sessions for higher education teachers (Case 5) and in collegial discussions (Case 6), where researchers functioned simultaneously as a dialogical co-learner and a critical friend, enabling transformation in both the participants and themselves. In Cases 11–13 (Latvia), researchers engaged in intergenerational learning spaces, where teachers traditionally positioned as authority figures began to embrace emotional openness, while students discovered and exercised their agency. In Case 18 (UK), the lead researcher adopted a consciously non-hierarchical 'member–facilitator' stance, creating space for participant ownership and creative agency. A similar duality was observed in Case 4 (Croatia), where researchers alternated between the roles of educators or counsellors and open co-inquirers, constantly

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negotiating their ethical and pedagogical positioning. Meanwhile, in Case 9 (Germany), researchers and professionals collaborated as a co-creating and co-reflecting team, further illustrating the embodied, shared, and evolving roles central to the AELD innovation.

Participants themselves, across these settings, were not only learners but also co-creators of learning and practice, engaging with multiple identity layers and confronting self-barriers such as discomfort, emotionally intensive responses, embarrassment, fear, and risk. These challenges rendered participation more complex, yet also more authentic and transformative. In Cases 14 and 15 (Portugal), researchers refrained from prescribing outputs, thereby enabling participants to take ownership and adapt the process, effectively shifting the researchers' role from instructors to enablers of democratic agency. In Case 18 (UK), participants transitioned between the roles of learner, reflector, and agent of change, highlighting the fluidity and dynamism of roles throughout the AELD process.

Collectively, these cases illustrate the reciprocal, co-creative, and context-sensitive nature of role enactment in AELD. Both researchers and participants move fluidly between roles influenced by institutional power, personal history, and the emergent emotional climate – that is, the collectively shaped affective environment that frames interactions – as well as the transformative potential of embodied learning practices.

2.4.3. Moving Beyond

In the context of AELD, the theme of moving beyond captures the essence of learning as an open-ended, non-linear process of becoming, marked by transformation, uncertainty, and the reconfiguration of identity. AELD encourages openness to new possibilities that emerge through democratic relations grounded in hospitality, amiability, and "the free autonomy in and through which people forge their future potentialities" (Docherty, 2006, p. 105). This process foregrounds the type of aesthetic judgment that Hannah Arendt identified as central to democracy – one rooted not in logical calculation but in "novelty, freedom, and plurality" (Räber, 2020, p. 7).

Unlike traditional education models focused on pre-determined outcomes, AELD engages participants in a journey filled with possibilities that exceed the known and expected. It encourages movement beyond both internal and external limitations: beyond inherited educational norms, beyond structural constraints, and beyond what participants initially perceive as possible. This expansive movement is often catalysed by embodied, emotional, and imaginative practices that disrupt the boundaries of self and context.

For example, in the UK (Case 19), a secondary school teacher reimagined their professional identity, moving beyond institutional expectations. This transformation was symbolised through a collage created during the project, featuring the statement:

> "[T]he teacher that I would like to be. And I think the teacher that this project has reminded me that I can be."

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Likewise, in Portugal (Cases 14 and 15l), artistic practices such as mural painting, dance, and role play enabled participants to somatically experience empathy, inclusion, and collective responsibility, demonstrating how transformation can occur across emotional, temporal, and embodied dimensions.

This process of becoming often requires confronting prejudices, fear, and risk as individuals shed familiar roles and narratives. In Case 18 (UK), participants critically reflected on their supervisory roles, one noting,

> "I think I learned that I may believe I am attuned to democratic ways of working but they may be less democratic than I think".

This insight supports Ellsworth's (2005) argument that learning is non-linear and affective, unfolding beyond traditional cognitive frames. A similar pattern emerged in the Finnish context (Case 5), where participants initially approached embodied practices with scepticism and discomfort. One student reflected,

> "Embodiment evoked a variety of thoughts and prejudices before the start of the course... connecting embodiment to work counselling felt very unfamiliar to me."

Case 10 (Germany) further illustrates this movement, as embodied methods and imaginative exercises allowed participants to shift from hierarchical norms towards ethics- and care-based democratic practices. In Cases 11–13 (Latvia), AELD nurtured intergenerational solidarity, dialogic relationships across age and authority lines, cultivating a sense of mutual discovery and intrinsic motivation for democratic engagement. Likewise, in Case 4 (Croatia), students transcended institutional passivity and awakened their civic agency through ABE methods.

These examples resonate with Boler's (1999) concept of a pedagogy of discomfort, which contends that emotions are deeply political and essential to learning and transformation. Boler critiques the "emotional rules" that determine which feelings are sanctioned and by whom, asserting that education must not only make these rules visible but support learners in moving beyond them, towards critical reflection, emotional agency, and structural change.

In Germany (Case 10), participants faced the limits of their bodies and emotions, encountering both doubt and self-discovery. Similarly, in the Finnish research (Case 5), discomfort and uncertainty were evident. One participant described their experience:

> "However, I had to really struggle through the exercise. I was very aware that at least one of the teachers had their eyes open and could see me all the time. It felt like I was doing something wrong or at least differently from others, and that seemed embarrassing. I was overly conscious of my movements and couldn't relax, as I kept thinking about what movement I should do next."

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In UK (Case 19), the teacher similarly experienced uncertainty and concern about risk, but also joy in experimenting with new pedagogical approaches – indicating a transformation that was both epistemic and affective. These experiences align with complexity theory, which understands learning as a dynamic, emergent, and adaptive process situated within evolving systems (Morrison, 2008). From this perspective, uncertainty is not a hindrance but a necessary condition for growth.

Haraway (2016) urges us to "stay with the trouble", to resist the urge for premature closure and instead embrace ambiguity and relational entanglement. AELD, through its aesthetic, embodied, and dialogical practices, cultivates precisely this orientation. It supports participants in navigating complexity by engaging the affective, intuitive, and expressive dimensions of knowing (Biesta, 2006). Rather than offering fixed answers, AELD opens new spaces for becoming, enabling learners to grow into more ethical, relational, and democratic ways of being than those that usually dominate conventional educational systems.

2.4.4. Disrupting Conventional Linear Time

The research demonstrated that the experience of time diverges in AELD significantly from conventional, linear models typically associated with formal education. For AELD, time is more closely aligned to the idea of "free time" associated with education which is intended to facilitate dialogue, reflection on underlying assumptions and beliefs and ongoing reconstruction of ideas: this is about experiencing "free time" as "a form of subjective and intersubjective time that ruptures kronos - the temporality associated with survival goals, ends over mean, production, necessity" (Kennedy, D., 2022, p. 195).

Time in AELD is subjective, fluid, and deeply personal, shaped by the emotional, cognitive, and embodied rhythms of each individual and setting. The same activity may require vastly different durations for different participants: the transformative process might begin well before a session, or unfold long after its conclusion. In Case 5 (Finland), students clearly articulated this idea, noting that the timeline of embodied insight often diverged from verbal reflection. Some reported that clarity emerged only after a significant delay, as they continued processing ideas beyond the session itself. This suggests that emotions, thoughts, and bodily sensations operate on asynchronous timelines, surfacing unpredictably and persisting beyond any scheduled pedagogical moment (Boler, 1999).

A similar phenomenon was observed in Case 12 (Latvia), where the use of drama sketches and collage revealed that the time required for emotional integration and transformation was highly individual, often deepening during post-activity discussions. Again, in Case 5 (Finland), some participants might have needed extended time to grasp the symbolic and personal meaning of movement- and music-based exercises. Allowing such time allows learners to pause, reflect, and engage deeply with themselves and others, outside the pressures of performance and outcomes.

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Allowing time in this way allows learners to pause, reflect, and engage deeply with themselves and others, outside the pressures of performance and outcomes.

In practice, institutional structures require educators to negotiate imposed time constraints in order to deliver their activities. This has implications for institutionalised learning spaces. In the German Higher Education context (Case 7), democracy was institutionalised regarding formal and institutional participation. Time became critical in many ways: As university students often do paid work aside from their studies, time constraints frequently limited their engagement with AELD. These institutionalised time structures restricted the potential for such pedagogical approaches. This shows that experience-based approaches to democracy-as-becoming need institutional openness and flexibility with regard to the structuring and availability of time.

AELD pedagogies, by design, slow down cognition and shift attention to embodied, affective, and intuitive processes. Through movement, gesture, and sensory experience, participants are invited to encounter others in non-reductive and relational ways, fostering empathy, negotiation, and mutual recognition (Koubová et al., 2022). In this sense, the temporality of AELD is not only about pacing but about opening space for deep, affective learning that respects the unique temporalities of transformation for each participant.

2.4.5. Tensions

A number of tensions are apparent in the experiences of participants across the AECED cases. These arise from the inherent complexities, challenges, and ambitious aspirations of exploring and developing AELD. These tensions are deeply embedded in the pedagogical, institutional, and sociocultural dynamics encountered during the PAR processes. Rather than being signs of failure, they illuminate the profound transformative potential of democratic pedagogies and underscore the need for reflexivity, support structures, and institutional change.

- One key tension lies between expectations and reality, both on a personal and institutional level. In the German Case 10, for instance, students prepared an embodied performance on democracy-as-becoming, undergoing a deep personal transformation as they moved beyond traditional expectations of higher education. However, this shift sparked doubts: as future teachers, they questioned whether such embodied, creative practices could survive in the rationalist and often rigid structures of formal schooling. This tension echoes the concerns raised by Collet-Sabé and Ball (2024), who caution that re-imagining education towards more collective, embodied epistemologies, such as commoning, requires more than pedagogical innovation; it demands structural rethinking of schools themselves.
- A second tension emerged between the desire for structure and the desire for creativity. In the Portuguese Cases (16 and 17), educators expressed contrasting needs: while some welcomed the open-endedness and imaginative freedom of ABE methods, others struggled without clearer instructional frameworks. This reflects a broader dilemma

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within democratic practice – what Woods (2005) refers to as the need to balance "firm framing" (a protective and enabling structure) with the "free space" necessary for democratic imagination and agency. Similarly, in the Croatian Case 3, participants appreciated the reflective and creative aspects of AELD but emphasised the difficulty of applying these methods within highly regulated academic environments.

- Time constraints further complicated these processes. Practical tensions around time were especially apparent in the UK Case 18, where doctoral supervisors engaged in collaborative AELD workshops. Although participants valued creative methods such as collage-making and embodied reflection, several noted that some activities felt rushed. The case concluded that 'gentle steering' might be necessary in collaborative spaces – but that institutional time pressures inevitably shape the depth and quality of engagement, influencing both the experience and the resulting designs of AELD-based practices. (See theme 'Disrupting conventional linear time' in sub-Section 2.2.4).
- Another recurrent theme was the tension between positive and negative emotional responses to the process itself. In the German Case 7, students initially responded with confusion and irritation when introduced to AELD approaches, finding it difficult to adapt to unfamiliar pedagogical rhythms. However, this discomfort – rather than a sign of resistance – was interpreted as a productive phase of deconditioning from conventional learning expectations. The Croatian Case 4 similarly found that students expressed both discomfort and enthusiasm as they confronted their own positionalities, power relations, and the emotional weight of democratic engagement.

These examples illustrate that the tensions experienced across the AECED Project are not barriers to success, but constitutive features of democratic processes. They reflect the friction that emerges when established norms are disrupted, when power is genuinely shared, and when individuals are invited to inhabit pedagogical spaces differently. As such, these tensions underscore the importance of cultivating responsive facilitation, providing institutional backing, and designing pedagogical frameworks that hold space and time for ambiguity, discomfort, and growth. Only through such means can the promise of democracy-as-becoming be authentically pursued in educational settings.

2.4.6. Institutional Barriers and Constraints

One of the most pervasive and structurally complex themes that emerged across the AECED Project is the presence of institutional barriers and constraints that challenge the integration and development of AELD. Although the manifestations of these barriers varied by national and institutional context, their influence was evident in most cases. This theme captures the ways in which educational institutions – shaped by historical, cultural, and policy-specific conditions – can hinder pedagogical innovation, particularly when it seeks to promote democratic transformation through AELD.

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One manifestation of institutional barriers and constraints is in the form of performative and neoliberal policy measures that have over many years affected educational institutions. Critical researchers highlight a global orthodoxy in educational policy which has tended to promote "narrowly conceived" ideas about teaching that "define the work and conduct of teachers" (Hickey & Riddle, 2025, p. 69). As well as school education, this performative and neoliberal policy trend has equally affected higher education and other public organisations. The latter, including universities, have been impelled "[u]nder the influence of neoliberal, managerialist policy doctrines like New Public Management (NPM)... to become more 'business-like,' increasingly overseeing performance and accountability through primarily quantitative key performance indicators and financial targets" (Visser et al**.,** 2024, pp. 1030**–**1031).

Nevertheless, in contexts where policy constraints are strongly felt, teachers may "work beyond the restrictions of mandated curricula and prescribed ways of working" by acting as individuals through "tactical intervention" (Hickey & Riddle**,** 2025, p. 71). This was the experience of the secondary education teacher in the UK Case 19. The teacher voiced concerns about institutional resistance, performance-driven accountability measures and hierarchical management structures that discourage teacher autonomy and make innovative AELD risky. However, through collaborative reflection and engagement with AECED resources, the teacher gained confidence to design and trial AELD pedagogy despite the perceived risks, uncertainties, and accountability pressures characterising their educational context.

Institutional and cultural constraints may take different forms. In some contexts, for example, the effects of performative and neoliberal policy may not be felt so strongly, but rigidities in and assumptions about the curriculum may be experienced as constraining the use of AELD and related areas of personal development and growth. Latvian educators (Cases 11-13), expressed an optimism (closely linked to Latvia's ongoing educational reform) that AELD activities could be embedded in both curricular and extracurricular programmes to support democratic transformation at individual, collective, and organisational levels. Equally, they identified the challenge of integrating AELD into subject-specific learning objectives and the need for a school environment that is supportive. The Latvian school principals themselves realised that, to bring about real educational transformation for democracy through AELD at the whole-school level, they as principals carry a significant responsibility. This includes allowing greater flexibility in the organisation of the school, starting with the lesson schedule; welcoming not only drama sketches and collage creation into teaching and learning, but also other forms of ABE learning; and encouraging both teachers and students to engage in projects that promote democracy within the school and the local community.

Another aspect impacting institutional constraints and culture is the wider context regarding democracy. The context for the Portuguese Cases (14, 15, 16, 17), for example, is a Portuguese culture that strongly values community, collaboration and relational well-being, aligning with the participatory and democratic principles of AELD. A different context is experienced in Croatia

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(Cases 1, 2, 3, 4). Croatia is deemed to be a young, emerging democracy; there is a lack of democratic practices and culture in Croatian schools and the training of future educators in education for democracy is still not systematically introduced and its necessity is often questioned by national decision makers. While Croatian universities operate under principles of academic freedom and institutional autonomy, democratic practices in teaching, governance, and student participation remain limited and traditional lecture-based teaching methods dominate, leaving little room for participatory and democratic learning approaches. Concepts such as democracy-as-becoming and active student engagement are not systematically integrated into curricula, particularly in teacher education, although there are some initiatives and projects that promote student-centred learning. In Croatian universities, there is still visible resistance to change, as many professors and administrators continue to favour traditional hierarchical structures and university educators often lack training in participatory and democratic teaching methods.

The question of how to overcome the limitations of institutionalised settings, which often engender feelings of alienation amongst educators and learners alike, was explicitly addressed in three of the German Cases (7, 8, 9). These cases illustrate efforts to challenge entrenched structures through collaborative reflection and embodied practice. The approach of Collet-Sabé and Ball (2022, 2024) offers a conceptual lens for these efforts: they advocate for reimagining formal educational institutions as open, place-based, and diversity-oriented collective learning contexts. Rather than merely reforming existing systems, they call for a process of de-institutionalisation, a movement towards what they describe as the 'episteme of commoning', where education is understood as a shared, relational, and co-created practice (Collet-Sabé & Ball, 2024).

In the face of institutional barriers and various constraints, it is evident that change and innovation are nevertheless possible. Spaces for change can be created or found. Such "creative spaces" are possible at different levels (Woods & Roberts, 2018, pp. 100–105); they interlink and influence each other over time and include:

- *subjective spaces*, which refer to the person's internal space where feeling and thinking differently can lead to the formulation of intentions for change.
- *agency spaces*, which refer to the space in which the person connects and interacts with others and begins to turn intentions into initial actions towards change.
- *social spaces*, where people collaboratively create change, which could comprise, for example, a professional development group developing ideas and/or formulating and implementing plans for change, a small project team with modest initial aims or larger networks of contributors to change working for institution-wide change.

In this context, the tensions, constraints, and resistances encountered across the AECED Project are not just barriers to be overcome; they are indicators of the profound reimagining required if

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educational institutions are to authentically embrace democracy as a lived, embodied, and aesthetic practice.

2.4.7. Safe Space

This theme emphasises the importance of spaces that feel safe and supportive for AELD participants, where they have a sense of belonging. At the heart of AELD lies what we might call a pedagogy of care – a way of working that pays close attention to emotional safety, relational ethics, and embodied presence. Across the AECED Project, participants repeatedly emphasised the importance of spaces that feel "safe enough" – environments where discomfort, experimentation, and co-creation can be embraced without fear of judgment or harm.

These "safe enough spaces" were not given but cultivated – co-created by facilitators and participants alike. They formed the conditions for meaningful reflection, dialogical exploration, and collaborative design of AELD practices. Whether in Higher Education or Adult, Professional, and Organisational Learning, these spaces supported participants to engage not only cognitively but also emotionally and bodily with the democratic values embedded in the AECED framework. The importance of safe spaces and safe practices was felt by many participants in different cases. One teacher described their experience in this way:

> "Sometimes, you just feel completely in sync with others, even without saying a word. It's like you just understand each other on a deeper level, and that connection brings everyone closer together." (Case 12, Latvia).

This was especially evident in cases involving deeply embodied approaches such as movement and dance. In Cases 5 and 6 (Finland) and Case 10 (Germany), participants engaged in practices that involved being seen, touched, and physically moved. Such settings heightened feelings of exposure and called for heightened interpersonal trust and mindful facilitation. In Case 10 (Germany), participants described the process of gradually "growing into a collective social body", as they learned to support each other and share responsibility for maintaining respectful, caring group dynamics. The body itself became the site of both discomfort and connection – necessitating a culture of mutual care.

To proactively support this process, the Finnish Team implemented the AG as a collective and explicit agreement to practice an acceptive attitude towards oneself and others while applying the AELD innovation. In the AECED Project, the AG was designed to foster trust and safety through embodied attunement and non-judgmental presence, as detailed in Section 2.2, and it was used as a preparatory intervention in Finland (Cases 5 and 6) to establish conditions where aesthetic and bodily expression could flourish. It proved effective not only in supporting emotional safety but in cultivating democratic values such as inclusion, mutuality, and shared responsibility, core to the AELD philosophy.

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A pedagogy of care also implies attentiveness to emotional and physical boundaries. In many Adult, Professional, and Organisational Learning cases, participants reported feeling unprepared to address the challenges that come with using ABE methods, particularly with how to hold space for difficult emotions or complex interpersonal dynamics. This highlights the importance of facilitators developing skills in emotionally supportive facilitation**: W**here care was present, it enabled deeper learning. For instance, in UK Case 19, a secondary school teacher's engagement with ABE pedagogies in a high-pressure, performative school context led to profound professional self-reflection. It was the trust and support cultivated in the collaborative space that enabled the teacher to explore new pedagogical possibilities.

The Croatian Case 3 further exemplifies how belonging fosters transformation. Participants reported that a sense of community within the group encouraged them to speak more openly about the challenges of change and to engage with aesthetic and embodied methods they might otherwise have resisted. Similarly, in Germany Case 7, a ritual of shared dinner at the beginning of the seminar disrupted traditional academic routines and marked a symbolic shift toward relational learning. The surprise and gratitude students expressed in response to this gesture reflected their recognition of a new kind of learning space – one grounded in togetherness, care, and mutual recognition.

Indeed, these relational practices – rituals of connection and collaborative reflection – exist across the AECED Project: environments where people can feel, think, and act differently. Such spaces are central not only to pedagogical innovation but to institutional transformation. They allow for the reimagining of roles, relationships, and responsibilities within educational settings and provide an antidote to the alienation often produced by institutional hierarchies and neoliberal logics.

Ultimately, this theme highlights that cultivating safety and care is not merely a soft or optional aspect of AELD – it is foundational. It enables risk-taking, supports embodied agency, and holds space for the emergence of new subjectivities. In doing so, it lays the groundwork for AELD to take root, not just as a method, but as an ethos of learning together in democratic, embodied, and humanising ways.

2.4.8. Engagement and Curiosity

This theme highlights the fact that participants generally had an inquiring and open approach to methods of aesthetic and embodied learning, as well as their application in education for democracy. Curiosity and interest in discovering the Prototype Pedagogical Framework and Guides were evident in the cases. Participants in the Early Years and Primary Education phase demonstrated intense curiosity when first introduced to the Prototype Pedagogical Framework and Guides, particularly the AELD innovation, despite varying levels of familiarity with the concepts. They expressed enthusiasm for learning more about democratic education methods, although there was uncertainty about how to apply them in the classroom. Willingness to try new things, with the accompanying challenges and uncertainties, was found in the Higher Education

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phase, and participants in the Adult, Professional, and Organisational Learning phase appreciated the use of ABE methods.

Many participants were on a journey, led by their openness to engage. For example, some university students (Finland Case 5) realised that their attitude towards embodied exercises changed from amused, curious and surprised (for doing unusual things during the lecture) to understanding their purpose and usefulness at the end. In a workshop for dance and movement therapists (within Finland Case 6), observing others' movements with the AG was experienced as a whole-body engagement and therefore not only work of the eyes. This can be interpreted as a notion of how the adoption of the AG can affect the whole experience of viewing the other (and self) more holistically.

In the UK Case 18, some participants recognised the revelatory role of pedagogical approaches involving ABE, noting that

> "ABE methods can challenge what you think you know and surface things which are useful to reflect on to develop understanding and practice."

For one participant, this led to the realisation that student success involves both supervisor and student, and that democracy is wider still,

> "through that connection and network and everything and other various stakeholders involved in the process as well, so that democracy is not just between us."

Especially in the case of embodied learning, the intensity of feelings was high. In Case 10 (Germany), students initially felt ambivalent, as they were tasked with preparing a publicly performed piece. Students reflected on feelings of fear, ambivalence and shyness. They commented on the inner process, which took place over time: it was described as daring to take more space, daring to move in unconventional ways, daring to explore feelings more reflexively, and daring to dive into co-creation, where individual performance in the Higher Education phase typically prevails. The observations and interviews revealed not only a vast potential for transformational learning but also a profound impact of the co-creative process. As this ended in a public performance, students needed to truly take to the stage, which meant going beyond the habitual limitations typically cultivated in educational institutions. Embodied approaches have proven to be powerful catalysts for individual change and for transcending self-imposed boundaries. Nevertheless, they require special attention, care, and expertise, as well as sensitivity, due to participants' exposure to being judged by others.

In the Croatia (Cases 3 and 4), some participants successfully linked these methods to the concept of democracy-as-becoming: one commented,

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> "...I love connecting democracy with aesthetic activities. I would like that there are more activities that are happening outside, in the nature...",

and another,

> "...every time in these educational activities, that was 2 hours, that I was just here, not thinking or doing anything else; I was completely emotionally engaged and I felt I was doing something very important for the society...."

However, others struggled to make the conceptual connection between ABE methods and democracy **a**nd others thought that the aspiration to democracy-as-becoming was utopian:

> "... Very difficult...to achieve this in society and individuals should be at a very high intellectual level where they would not put themselves first but society and its well-being...it sounds a bit utopian...."

Across diverse contexts and participant groups, engagement and curiosity emerged as key drivers for exploring AELD. While initial interest often involved openness and experimentation, deeper engagement grew through emotional involvement, reflection, and co-creation. However, the relationship between aesthetic and embodied approaches and democracy remains complex, with varying degrees of conceptual understanding and acceptance. Supporting this journey requires special attention and responsive facilitation, and space for both enthusiasm and openness to engagement.

2.4.9. Co-creation

The value of collaborative reflection and co-creation is increasingly recognised in educational research and practice (Campbell & Ceau, 2023), and it emerged as a foundational feature of the AECED Project. Across all participating contexts, AECED workshops and sessions were characterised by what Woods and Roberts (2018, p. 74) describe as a "reciprocal learning relationship" – a dynamic in which all participants contribute to and learn from shared activities, discussions, and experiences. This theme emphasises the role of collaboration in developing AELD not just as a pedagogical method, but as a democratic practice in itself. In the Higher Education cases, collaborative engagement was essential for both understanding democracy conceptually and applying embodied methods in practice. Creating collective responsibility and engaging in dialogical reflection helped participants internalise democratic values while co-designing AELD trials. This form of collaborative meaning-making proved critical in helping educators and students alike to move beyond traditional hierarchical models of learning.

This distinction between individual and collaborative engagement was observed in the UK Case 18, where adult and professional learners interacted with the AECED resources in different modes, online, in-person and independent**ly**. Participants who worked in groups appreciated the

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opportunity for collegial discussion, reflection, and co-construction of meaning. In contrast, those who worked individually noted the absence of this relational dynamic, with one commenting:

> "It would have been a different type of experience if you'd have been doing it with other people, and perhaps a better experience,"

and further acknowledging that doing it together would have been really productive**.** This suggests that co-creation significantly enhances both the depth and the emotional resonance of the learning process.

Case 13 (Latvia) offers a compelling illustration of how co-creation can disrupt conventional roles and foster new relational dynamics. A school student reflecting on joint activities with teachers commented,

> "We were surprised that teachers could laugh and be open, and we could co-create something significant."

Here, the AELD innovation transformed teachers from distant authority figures into co-learners and co-creators, opening up space for shared agency and mutual recognition.

Beyond the individual and interpersonal levels, the theme of co-creation also extended to organisational learning and epistemic transformation. In the German Case 8, professionals in the field of social work collaborated with organisational stakeholders through Future-Pattern Labs. These structured, aesthetic-embodied workshops were designed not only to explore democratic practices but also to embed them into organisational routines. The use of PLC cards enabled participants from diverse backgrounds to engage in shared reflection and meaning-making, facilitated deep reflection and enabled participants to identify "solutionary patterns" for enacting democracy-as-becoming. This approach helped bridge individual learning with institutional change, illustrating the systemic potential of AELD methodologies when applied through participatory, reflective processes.

Taken together, these examples reveal that co-creation is not merely a method but a democratic principle. It reshapes relationships, fosters more profound understanding, and supports transformation at personal, collective, and organisational levels. Whether through shared workshops, collaborative inquiry, or joint experimentation with embodied methods, co-creation enables participants to reimagine education as a space of shared responsibility, mutual learning, and democratic becoming.

Section 2.4 has set out and discussed nine themes that illuminate the process of engaging with the Prototype Pedagogical Framework and Guides and participants' experiences in designing, co-designing and trialling of AELD. Understanding of these themes and their implications for the practice of AELD will be further developed in the writing-up of the research for scientific publications and other forms of dissemination.

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2.5. Evidence-Based Findings for Refining Prototype Pedagogical Framework and Guides

This Section 2.5 concludes Part 2 with an overview of cross-case findings related to RQ 4 (AECED, 2023, p. 1), presenting recommendations based on cross-cutting findings derived from the multi-case trials that focus on the development of the AECED Prototype Pedagogical Framework and Guides (initially developed at the beginning of the project, see D3.1 and D3.2). The analysis is primarily informed by intra-phase conclusion reports and further enriched by a critical examination of cross-cutting themes that emerged across educational phases. These findings form a foundation for refinements that will be carried out as part of WP5.

To enhance clarity and usability, this section is organised into three sub-sections. The first addresses improvements to the Pedagogical Framework based on cross-case findings. The second offers recommendations for refining the Pedagogical Guide – Part I. The third presents recommendations for the Pedagogical Guides – Part II, incorporating both cross-cutting insights applicable across all educational phases and phase-specific suggestions for implementation.

2.5.1. Recommendations for Refining the Prototype Pedagogical Framework

While the educational settings and ABE approaches varied, the main AECED concepts and pedagogical principles of democracy consistently revealed patterns of strength, tension, and transformation. The recommendations presented here focus on refining both the initial AECED concepts and the theoretical and conceptual insights that emerged during the project. In addition, they address cross-cutting themes identified through the analysis. The following discussion outlines the necessary adjustments to improve the Prototype Pedagogical Framework – specifically in terms of its responsiveness, usability, and the overall impact of AELD.

Power-sharing and role fluidity

The principle of power-sharing remained a fundamental element across all phases of AELD; however, it required intentional facilitation and scaffolding to be enacted effectively. Although participants valued the opportunity to co-create learning processes, many expressed uncertainty about how to navigate and manage shared authority/peer-governance in practice.

Example: Case 19 (UK, Secondary Education) and Case 10 (Germany, Higher Education) demonstrated that both educators and learners encountered difficulties in balancing situated institutional hierarchies with participatory engagement.

Implication: The Framework would benefit from the inclusion of clearer guidance and practical tools to support the implementation of power-sharing. This may include strategies such as co-authored learning agreements, rotating facilitation roles, and regular dialogic check-ins to ensure inclusive decision-making and distributed responsibility.

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Relational well-being and safe spaces

The importance of emotional safety, mutual recognition, and relational connection was echoed across all phases. These elements were foundational to participant engagement and transformation.

Example: Cases 5, 6 (Finland), Case 10 (Germany) and Cases 11, 12, 13 (Latvia) revealed that ABE methods fostered group cohesion and care-based learning spaces.

Implication: It is recommended that the section on the 'pedagogy of care' within the Framework be expanded to include concrete guidance on emotionally responsive pedagogies, with particular emphasis on practices that cultivate trust and safety in AELD contexts.

Transformative dialogue and reflexivity

Participants highlighted the need for structured opportunities for reflection as a means of deepening their understanding of personal experiences and developing democratic awareness.

Example: Cases from Croatia (Case 4) and the UK (Case 18) demonstrated that guided discussions combined with personal storytelling enabled participants to establish links between ABE practice and democratic meaning-making.

Implication: The Framework should incorporate scaffolding for reflexive dialogue, such as sample prompts, time-for-reflection tools, and collective synthesis techniques.

Comfort and engagement with embodied learning

The cases highlighted the importance of engaging learners through integrated cognitive, emotional, and somatic approaches. However, some participants initially found the ABE practices unfamiliar or uncomfortable, requiring sensitive and adaptive facilitation.

Example: In Case 10 (Germany), students initially showed reluctance towards performance-based activities but gradually recognised their role in fostering transformation.

Implication: The Framework should emphasise the progressive and adaptive use of embodied methods, providing multiple entry points that respect individual comfort levels and encourage gradual engagement. The progressive and adaptive use of such practices is essential to facilitate meaningful participation and transformation.

Contextual responsiveness and local adaptation

The effective implementation of AELD approaches depended on their adaptation to national and cultural, institutional, and educational contexts.

Example: Higher Education Cases 3 and 4 (Croatia) revealed institutional rigidity that constrained democratic experimentation, while Latvian school leaders (Cases 11–13) identified and proposed innovative ways to embed AELD within national policies.

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Implication: It is recommended that the Framework be enhanced with tools to support local contextualisation, such as a reflective planning framework enabling users to systematically assess enabling factors and potential barriers within their specific settings.

Temporal flexibility and non-linear learning

AELD practices often extended beyond conventional timeframes, reflecting the recursive nature of the learning process. Participants frequently experienced delayed insights as their engagement with the material continued to develop over time.

Example: For participants from Finland (Cases 5 and 6) and Latvia (Cases 11–13), significant learning moments occurred after the formal sessions had ended, highlighting the ongoing, evolving nature of their democratic learning.

Implication: The Framework should recognise and support non-linear learning trajectories by incorporating flexible pacing, opportunities for revisiting activities, and the conceptualisation of time as a vital democratic and pedagogical resource.

Inclusivity, gender sensitivity, and intersectionality

The implementation of inclusive practice required both critical awareness and facilitative sensitivity to address how gender and other intersecting identities shape participation and engagement, specifically in ABE practices.

Example: Cases from Finland, Germany, and Portugal (5, 7, 10, 16, 17) illustrated how gender dynamics can influence levels of participation and engagement. These cases highlighted the importance of applying a power-critical lens to democratic learning processes.

Implication: Facilitators should be provided with reflective prompts to critically examine their own positionality and to identify potential barriers to inclusion arising from intersectional perspective.

Drawing on the cross-case findings for the launch-ready Framework presented above, the following practical recommendations are proposed:

- Incorporate organisational change dimensions.
- Acknowledge and address contextual constraints.
- Strengthen attention to the ethical dimensions of AELD.
- Make ethics and trust-building central to the Framework.
- Integrate AG as a core pedagogical principle. AG supports relational safety, emotional openness, and ethical co-creation.
- Clarify the threefold approach of commoning, ensuring that its relevance to democracy-as-becoming is clear.
- Integrate the conceptual developments that have come through experiences of the multi-case trials.

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- Ensure accessible yet conceptually clear language throughout the Framework, enabling practical users to engage meaningfully with key ideas.

These suggestions will ensure that the Framework maintains its democratic responsiveness while accommodating different learning contexts.

2.5.2. Recommendations for Refining the Prototype Guide Part I

Immediate priorities for the Prototype Guide Part I include simplifying the familiarisation process, strengthening the connection between theory and practice through visual and illustrative tools, and developing modular, accessible materials that foster emotional safety, promote inclusion, and support adaptability across diverse educational contexts.

The initial familiarisation process (e.g. reading materials, platform navigation) was found to be overly complex. To address this:

- Include illustrative examples which demonstrate how aesthetic and embodied practices (e.g. gesture stories, collages, body-based reflection) enact and communicate democratic principles in practice.
- Simplify the familiarisation process, ensuring entry points are clearly differentiated according to users' prior experience.
- Key concepts such as embodied reflexivity, democracy-as-becoming, and VEN should be linked to practical, illustrated examples.
- Link key concepts such as embodied reflexivity, democracy-as-becoming, and VEN to practical, illustrated examples that demonstrate their application into the educational settings (as observed in all educational settings).
- Provide adjustable tools which can be adapted to fit different learning environments including formal and informal learning settings.
- Develop the existing glossary in the Prototype Framework and create a visual glossary which defines the emerging AECED concepts such as AELD, AG, PLC, **c**ommoning, and democracy-as-becoming through metaphors and visual analogies (**e.g.** AG as a lens or mirror, PLC as a bridge or map).
- Create an additional visual guide which illustrates the AECED phases through real-world examples, vignettes created from the cases that demonstrate democratic learning development through aesthetic and embodied practices and collective agency and disruption, illustrating real-world implementation for each educational phase.
- Include instructions on how to practice AG in the preparation instructions for AELD.
- Incorporate guidance on providing emotional support and negotiating personal boundaries within learning environments.

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Such clarity will support broader uptake and meaningful engagement among facilitators and learners from diverse educational, cultural, and professional contexts, thereby enhancing the adaptability and impact of the Prototype Guide across varying settings.

2.5.3. Recommendations for Refining the Prototype Guides Part II

The research findings demonstrated that, although the Prototype Pedagogical Framework and Guide Part I establish a common foundation, the AECED Guides Part II require adaptation to address the specific pedagogical aspects and the diverse needs of users and target groups within each educational phase. The recommendations in this sub-section address the specific pedagogical requirements, limitations, and opportunities within each phase, as well as overarching cross-cutting themes, providing concrete examples and practical guidance for implementation.

a. Cross-cutting Recommendations for all Part II Guides

The participants from all education phases showed the most positive response when they encountered visual and embodied examples. The combination of storytelling with body mapping and image-based approach and dance performance proved to be highly effective for co-creation, participation, and reflection in Croatia, Germany, and Portugal (Cases 1, 4, 10, 16). Experiencing the democratic values through body and movement–based exercises clarified the connections between the embodied experiences and democracy-as-becoming (Finland, Cases 5 and 6). Hence:

- Use a variety of visual materials, including pictures, drawings, tables, videos, and case studies.
- Structure educational materials with core content and optional sections, allowing educators to adapt delivery according to institutional time and resource constraints.
- Offer digital facilitation models drawing on successful hybrid and online implementations from Portugal, the UK, and Germany (Cases 10, 16-18, Adult, Professional, and Organisational Learning).
- Provide both structured and open-ended pathways to accommodate contexts needing rigid frameworks (e.g. Cases 11-13, Latvia) and more exploratory approaches (e.g. Cases 7–10, Germany).
- Encourage implementation of AELD through peer collaboration and institutional support, as demonstrated in Finland (Cases 5 and 6).

b. Early Years and Primary Education

Cases: 1, 2 (Croatia) and 14, 15 (Portugal)

Key Insights: ABE methods such as storytelling, drawing, and forum-based discussions effectively enabled children and educators to collaborate and reflect. Young learners responded positively

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to democratic tasks that combined play with emotional engagement. Young children require better facilitation tools from educators to understand democratic concepts.

Challenges: Young learners experienced limitations in their ability to engage through their bodies due to the constraints of online platforms. Additionally, educators often lacked experience with ABE methods and child-led facilitation approaches.

Recommendations:

- Develop pre-designed AELD tools that children can independently use to support their inquiry processes.
- Provide adult facilitation guidance focusing on appropriate language, scaffolding reflective dialogue, and maintaining emotional safety.
- Incorporate hybrid and offline digital formats to preserve embodied interaction.
- Design developmentally appropriate entry points for students to explore power-sharing and care practices.

c. Secondary Education

Cases: 11, 12, 13 (Latvia) and 19 (UK)

Key Insights: ABE practices such as collage, sketching, and drama supported students in developing ethical imagination and civic reflection. Educators demonstrated increased willingness to undertake pedagogical experiments, supported by peer dialogue and explicit conceptual scaffolding.

Challenges: Maintaining accountability standards alongside limited time availability hindered sustained engagement. Additionally, there is a need to establish a connection between AELD and established curricular subjects, including history, citizenship, and literature.

Recommendations:

- Integrate AELD modules within existing curricular structures, using aesthetic and embodied approaches to explore fundamental rights (e.g. human rights, children's rights), inclusion, and historical content.
- Provide detailed models illustrating how ABE methods can be embedded to promote a democratic ethos and relationships.
- Introduce brief embodied educational sessions suitable for limited timeframes to foster openness and mutual listening.
- Organise cross-generational reflection and co-creation spaces to support intergenerational learning through student-teacher co-design initiatives.

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- Offer guidance on managing institutional resistance and classroom control during AELD activities.

d. Higher Education

Cases: 3, 4 (Croatia), 5 (Finland), 7, 10 (Germany)

Key Insights: Students and educators responded positively to embodied and narrative methods when these were thoughtfully contextualised. Core transformative elements included role flexibility, collaborative facilitation, and embodied reflective practices.

Challenges: The traditional structure of higher education institutions, characterised by lectures, credit systems, and strict timetables, posed obstacles to the iterative and flexible nature of AELD. Additionally, some participants showed limited familiarity with ABE pedagogies.

Recommendations:

- Adopt modular formats to integrate AELD within credit-bearing courses, such as electives, workshops, or seminars.
- Provide foundational educational materials explaining the rationale behind ABE methods and the concept of democracy-as-becoming, targeting both students and faculty members.

e. Adult, Professional, and Organisational Learning

Cases: 6 (Finland), 8, 9 (Germany), 12, 13 (Latvia), 16, 17 (Portugal), and 18 (UK).

Key Insights: Democratic professional practice benefits significantly from aesthetic and embodied learning approaches. Participants showed strong acceptance of asynchronous and hybrid learning formats within the Adult, Professional, and Organisational Learning phase. They valued learning spaces that fostered collective meaning-making, co-creation, and emotional depth.

Challenges: The asynchronous learning environment requires better scaffolding systems to support students. Additionally, workplace culture, along with situated organisational hierarchies, sometimes blocked both shared authority and emotional openness amongst team members.

Recommendations:

- Develop asynchronous AELD engagement templates, including visual diaries, reflective video logs, and collaborative murals.
- Provide guidance to help teams cultivate shared ownership through AELD practices in Adult, Professional, and Organisational Learning settings.
- Incorporate facilitation strategies that emphasise emotional responsiveness and offer clear instructions for creating emotionally safe and supportive learning environments.

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- Highlight the links between AELD, organisational innovation, workplace democracy, and responsive leadership.
- Design monitoring tools and reflection methods specifically tailored to Adult, Professional, and Organisational Learning settings.

The evidence outlined in the preceding sub-section across educational settings provides the basis for the following practical recommendations:

- Prototype VEN Kits - These kits support the flexible implementation of VEN principles across diverse educational settings and user groups, increasing both accessibility and adaptability of its core principles.
- Visual and Narrative Tools - The ABE pedagogies allow participants to articulate their complex thoughts and feelings and personal experiences, particularly when dealing with abstract or sensitive democratic concepts.
- Modular Method Combinations – Educators/facilitators can select and combine modular tools, adapting them to diverse institutional settings, cultural contexts, and participant needs.
- Digital and Hybrid Tools - Digital methods enhance accessibility and enable flexible documentation of AELD in both online and blended learning environments.
- Facilitator Training and Reflexive Practice - Educators/facilitators receive training that addresses the ethical, emotional, and pedagogical dimensions of AELD. This training also supports them in managing challenging situations, navigating power dynamics, and reflecting on their own positionality.
- AELD Anchoring – Use ABE approaches as a core pedagogical base to cultivate secure, imaginative spaces that support relational trust, ethical reflection, and active participation.
- Distributed Facilitation Frameworks - Clear facilitation frameworks help prevent the process from disappearing or becoming overly extractive, enabling genuine shared responsibility and co-agency.

The findings emphasise the necessity of flexible pedagogical methods that promote education for democracy and adapt to diverse contexts. While approaches vary across educational phases due to participant groups, educational settings, and cultural differences, several principles consistently emerged: care, trust, co-agency, ethical reflexivity, time flexibility, which provide a base for

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refining the AECED Prototype Pedagogical Framework and Guides. Experiences from multiple countries and phases confirm that no single model fits all contexts; instead, success depends on attentiveness, collaborative engagement, and ethical sensitivity rather than on specific techniques or settings. These findings are now ready to guide the next steps in practical implementation and policy dialogue across Europe and beyond.

2.5.4. Implications for WP5 and Launch-Readiness

This final sub-section outlines the direct implications of both cross-phase and phase-specific findings for the next stage of the AECED Project: Developing Launch-Ready Prototype Pedagogical Framework and Guides under WP5. It translates the main findings into practical priorities that will guide the development, refinement, and dissemination of pedagogical resources that are evidence-based, context-sensitive, and adaptable to diverse educational settings.

The implementation of structured scaffolding should enhance practical usability

During the case trials, participants across all phases requested additional structured guidance for applying AELD principles. While responding to the needs for the revisions, this process should ensure to maintain conceptual anchors. Therefore, WP5 development should emphasise:

- Providing detailed, step-by-step examples that demonstrate how to implement AELD, making reference to the core principles and values of democracy-as-becoming.
- Supplying session planning templates, activity flow templates, and facilitation strategy templates tailored to each educational phase.
- Including recommended starting points for implementing power-sharing, emotional safety, and role fluidity in real-world practice.
- Ensure the main AECED concepts and principles remain consistent throughout all materials, e.g. four dimensions of democracy – power-sharing, relational well-being, transformative dialogue, and holistic learning – acting as guiding principles, preserving conceptual coherence amid flexible implementations.

Enable Cultural and Institutional Adaptation

The implementation process was heavily influenced by rigid institutional norms and diverse cultural contexts, as highlighted in the transnational analysis. Launch-Ready Pedagogical Framework and Guides should include reflective planning tools to help users assess enabling and constraining factors within their local contexts, thereby promoting usability across different systems. These materials ought to incorporate contextualisation checklists to assist users in adapting content to formal curricula, policy environments, and non-formal learning spaces. In addition, flexible learning options – such as in-person, asynchronous, and hybrid formats – should be provided to effectively support adult and professional learners.

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Embed Affective and Embodied Pedagogical Literacy

Participants discovered that aesthetic and embodied methods were effective, though many lacked prior experience and familiarity with these approaches. Launch-**R**eady Pedagogical Framework and Guides should support professional confidence through the following measures:

- Including concise conceptual primers on embodied learning, aesthetic inquiry, and democracy-as-becoming within the materials.
- Introducing the AG and guided co-reflection tools early on as methods to establish trust and encourage participation through embodied experiences.
- Emphasising emotionally grounded pedagogies by providing facilitation guidance, particularly to support students and educators who may experience discomfort or emotional intensity.

Reinforce Inclusive and Intersectional Design

The cross-case analysis revealed that inclusive and gender-sensitive facilitation is crucial. WP5 should critically consider that all materials actively incorporate intersectional awareness by:

- Providing guidance on adapting facilitation approaches to accommodate diverse learner identities, including age, gender, ability, language proficiency, and socio-emotional backgrounds.
- Including examples and case studies that reflect a variety of lived experiences and social positions to ensure relevance and inclusivity.
- Offering specific strategies for creating safe, inclusive learning environments that respect and affirm diverse identities and address potential barriers related to gender and other intersecting factors.
- Encouraging facilitators to reflect critically on their own positionality and biases and how these may impact their interactions with learners.
- Embedding accessible and inclusive design principles to support learners with different abilities and needs, such as multilingual resources and alternative communication formats.

Ensure Flexibility

The implementation of AELD require**s** a balance between open-endedness and the need for guidance. WP5 should address this issue by:

- Adopting a modular design that offers ready-to-use examples and adaptable templates (e.g. session plans, activity flows, facilitation strategies).
- Including layered content featuring clear 'start here' overviews alongside deeper sections. This supports facilitators of varying experience levels across diverse educational settings.

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Prepare for User Testing and Feedback Integration

The Guides will achieve their goal of usability and adaptability in different European contexts when WP5 implements the following:

- The project should conduct user testing across partner countries to validate clarity, accessibility, and adaptability through feedback rounds.
- The Guides (Part II) should contain features which enable users to document their adaptations while building a dynamic collection of practical knowledge.
- The digital Guides should contain built-in feedback tools which allow users to add their experiences through reflection prompts or adaptation notes.

The AECED Prototype Pedagogical Framework and Guides are important tools for supporting the transformation of education for democracy through aesthetic and embodied approaches. WP5 development needs to focus on usability, contextual sensitivity, emotional safety, and flexibility to prepare the tools for large-scale implementation without compromising the project's core democratic values. The outlined insights create a pathway to develop the Prototypes into active living resources for creative action, which will motivate and assist European educators and educators worldwide.

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3. CONCLUSION OF THE MULTI-CASE TRIALS

In Part 3, the conclusion of the multi-case trials includes a discussion about the limitations of this research phase (3.1); an overview of implications for further research (3.2); before outlining how the learning from WP4 will inform the next phase of the project, which is the development of launch-ready resources and their exploitation.

3.1. Limitations of the AECED Research

The AECED research identified some common limitations that shaped the implementation and evaluation of the project. These limitations, which varied across countries and educational phases, are presented under the following overarching categories: (1) methodological limits and institutional barriers; (2) participant engagement and time resources; (3) power dynamics in collaborative processes; (4) challenges in virtual and hybrid settings; and (5) sample size and duration of research.

The implementation of PAR and AELD brought distinct methodological challenges, particularly in institutional settings that prioritise standardisation, accountability, and hierarchy. PAR's iterative, flexible nature resists fixed protocols and predetermined outcomes, often clashing with rigid educational systems.

In the UK context (Cases 18 and 19), this was linked to low engagement and uptake of the AELD approach. The institutional environment limits the scope for democratic pedagogical practices, thereby illustrating the powerful influence of macro-political pressures on what is pedagogically possible within institutional settings.

In most cases (1, 5, 6, 7, 8, 10, 14–17, 18), researchers reported limitations related to participant engagement and time resources. These ranged from participants dropping out of courses or trials in Finland and Portugal (Cases 5, 6, 14–17) to irregular participation in Croatia and the UK (Cases 1 and 18) and challenges in maintaining continuous collaboration with stakeholders in Germany (Case 10). In addition, levels of engagement varied both between and within participant groups. For example, not all teacher-participants actively engaged with the Prototype Pedagogical Framework and Guides in Croatia (Case 1); not all students submitted lecture diaries and reflections in Finland (Case 5); not all participants attended the reflection process, specifically interviews in Germany (Cases 7 and 8).

Potential power imbalances posed questions regarding situated hierarchies in the institutional and research settings. Considering power dynamics within the research setting, the Croatian Case 4 pointed out that power imbalances might emerge, as PAR involves collaboration between researchers and participants, thereby there is a risk of researchers unintentionally dominating decision-making processes or contributions.

In Latvia's secondary education schools (Cases 11-13), intergenerational tensions emerged, as older teachers often displayed lower democratic openness, which impacted classroom dynamics.

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However, the AELD approach promoted mutual respect and relational dialogue, offering partial mitigation. In Finland, teachers and students in Higher Education (Cases 5 and 6) express a desire for more collective power-sharing and responsibility in learning, though students often still defer to perceived hierarchical knowledge holders. Smaller, more intimate groups facilitate democratic, trusting learning environments, indicating the importance of group dynamics in embodying democratic ideals.

In the Adult, Professional, Organisational Learning phase, Germany's cultural education professionals/co-researchers and multiplicators/activists in the commoning field actively engaged with the AELD framework, blending their organisational roles with democratic transformation efforts. Yet, tensions persist regarding the fit between grassroots commoning practices and formal democratic institutions.

Several cases encountered difficulties in delivering embodied and aesthetic pedagogies within virtual or hybrid environments. The withdrawal of six participants during an eight-week asynchronous online study in the Portuguese context (Cases 14–17) highlights the limits of virtual learning to support sustained engagement.

In the German Case 10, online settings made it difficult for participants to experience ABE and AELD as embodied practices, compounded by technical issues and the absence of co-presence. These findings suggest that while digital tools can widen access, they also risk undermining the relational and sensory dimensions critical to democratic learning.

Small sample size interventions are acknowledged in almost all cases in Croatia, Finland, Germany, Portugal, and the UK, prioritising depth and contextual detail over comparative analysis or generalisation. Some cases expressed a desire for more participants, such as the UK (Case 18, Cycle 4). By their very nature, PAR challenges traditional research paradigms and is therefore best suited to exploring nuanced, context-dependent phenomena in depth.

Another cross-cutting limitation was a relatively short duration of the interventions, which limited the ability to capture long-term institutional transformation or behavioural shifts. For instance, in Croatian universities, although students showed early signs of interest in democratising educational practices through AELD, it remains uncertain whether these initial transformations can be sustained. In Germany and Finland, where students and professionals reported motivation to engage with AELD, limited time and workload pressures curtailed deeper, ongoing participation.

While many cases reported promising developments, such as strengthened democratic dialogue, enhanced collaboration, or new pedagogical frameworks, longitudinal follow-up would be necessary to assess the durability and scalability of these changes. The project's relatively short research window limited insight into whether democratic shifts in practice would be maintained or replicated beyond the project scope.

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3.2. AELD Innovation: Implications for Future Research, Policy and Practice

This section offers a brief overview of the new insights that have emerged from the nineteen cases and the cross-case analysis and interpretation presented in Part 2, developed through the implementation of AELD innovations within the AECED Project.

In terms of researching the challenge and value of using AELD, the size and ambition of this research are unprecedented. Nineteen PAR trials explored AELD as their prime topic. This research built upon what is known about the role of the aesthetic and embodied dimension in learning. Our feelings, emotions and sensibilities – embedded in our bodily senses – are integral to how we learn; and in terms of what we learn, they are constitutive of areas of development such as (a) aesthetic and embodied awareness (coming to understand and be sensitive to feelings and the role of the body, and what it is to feel nourished and enriched as a human being), (b) ethical sensibilities (cultivating dimensions of human growth that some may call character and conscience and others human sensibility, virtue or compassion), and (c) aesthetic qualities and collaborative, reflexive and critical capabilities. Despite their significance, aesthetic and embodied learning remain**s** marginalised within mainstream educational discourses on democracy (AECED, 2022: ART B:1). The AECED Project was conceived precisely to address this gap by designing interventions that create collaborative learning opportunities through ABE pedagogies aimed at nurturing the feelings, emotions, sensibilities, and capacities essential for democracy. What is new from the AECED research is what has been found concerning aesthetic and embodied learning for active engagement in democracy and democratic relationships.

As a brief response to the question of what is new from the AECED research, we synthesise here, from the analyses detailed in Part 2, key points in the form of seven findings.

The first finding is that AELD was shown to be effective in reframing assumptions about how democracy can be known and understood. Participants developed an enhanced appreciation of the value of moving beyond a purely cognitive engagement with democracy to exploring it aesthetically, bodily and relationally with others. We have referred to this as an epistemic transformation. This is to denote that the change is a fundamental one - from an assumption that understanding democracy is associated with analytical intelligence and cognitive knowledge to an appreciation that understanding democracy can come through aesthetic and embodied knowing.

The second is that AELD was shown to be capable of cultivating aesthetic and embodied qualities essential to democracy. For example, cases found participants who, through engaging in the design and trialling of AELD, fostered qualities such as greater empathy, curiosity, interpersonal adaptability and a sense of collective responsibility; as well as greater openness to 'seeing' the other, defined as a capacity to engage with difference in a way that moves beyond preconceptions, stereotypes or fixed perspectives. These qualities connect with the collective agreement in some cases to adopt an 'acceptive gaze' attitude towards oneself and others to

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foster trust, safety and a non-judgemental presence. Such qualities are integral to democratic activities and relations that are inclusive and create a sense of safety and possibility.

The third is that AELD was found to increase aesthetic and embodied awareness, enhancing the epistemic resources for democracy. Cases found enhancement of embodied and sensory ways of knowing, which included drawing upon bodily awareness, learning to trust bodily intuition and learning to take notice of emotions and relational presence. This enhancement of aesthetic and embodied awareness and its integration with cognitive and analytic knowledge expands the epistemic resources for democratic discussion and for collective and individual decision-making in democracy.

The fourth is that it was shown that AELD could generate movement towards more democratic ways of knowing. This involved moving from rigid, hierarchical models of knowledge transmission towards more open-ended, dialogic and co-constructed ways of knowing. It included participants seeing beyond disciplinary or institutional boundaries and beginning to reimagine knowledge production as a collective, relational and iterative process. These more open-ended and co-constructed ways of knowing were reinforced by the co-creative approaches that characterised the cases. Across contexts, participants themselves highlighted the value of collaborative reflection and co-creation in fostering deeper engagement, mutual understanding, and shared ownership of learning. What is found in the AECED cases is that AELD can disrupt conventional roles and foster new relational dynamics in ways that lead to more open and collaborative approaches to democratic discussion and to collective and individual decision-making in democracy. AELD is conducive to learning to engage in the collaborative meaning-making that is essential to democracy-as-becoming.

The fifth is that cases found that it was practicable to cultivate opportunities and create spaces for AELD. Participants emphasised the importance of spaces that feel 'safe enough' – environments where discomfort, experimentation and co-creation can be embraced without fear of judgement or rejection. Ways found to be conducive to creating safe spaces include practising an AG, a concept being explored and developed in the AECED Project. AG is a chosen attitude towards others and oneself which opens up space to recognise and evaluate one's automatic judgements and their origins in both an empathic and critical way. A challenge to the feasibility of creating opportunities and spaces for AELD are institutional barriers and constraints. For example, rigid institutional structures, cultural resistance to participatory and democratic approaches to education and the effects of performative and neoliberal policies can act as barriers to creating opportunities for AELD. However, it was found in the AECED cases that spaces for introducing and exploring AELD could be created or found, even though there may be difficulties in doing so.

The sixth is that it was shown that AELD could be experienced as an open-ended, non-linear process of becoming in which participants were on a learning journey where possibilities were

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discovered that were not expected. There were cases of AELD, for example, in which established discourses were disrupted which allowed new ideas and future practices and identities to be imagined – for instance through the **c**ommoning approach explored in some cases. AELD is thus able to create an experience of the kind of democratic relations – democracy-as-becoming – in which people come to be co-creative actors open to and shaping their own possibilities.

The seventh is that the interconnecting effects of these findings enhance a 'feel' for democracy. 'Feel' was the term used in the design of the AECED Project. We are able now to better understand and articulate this 'feel' through the concept of democratic sensibility. This concept refers to a heightened sensibility towards feelings and bodily senses in democratic activity and towards connectedness and a fundamental sense of equality of worth (within and between the human and natural worlds), as well as openness to learning from and with others and to new possibilities.

These innovations introduced by the AECED Project have the potential to inform future developments for research, policy, and practice. For research, they call for further exploration of aesthetic and embodied pedagogies as legitimate epistemic approaches to education for democracy, encouraging more interdisciplinary, participatory, and affectively attuned methodologies. For policy, the findings underscore the need to create structural and curricular space for pedagogies that value emotional, sensory, and relational dimensions of learning – supporting more inclusive and democratic educational systems, further fostering democratic citizenship. For practice, the findings affirm the transformative potential of AELD in fostering empathy, reflexivity, co-creation, and democratic sensibility, highlighting the importance of safe, collaborative learning environments that embrace diversity, openness, and shared meaning-making.

3.3. Sustaining WP4 Multi-Case Trialling Progress Across the Project

Findings from WP4 demonstrated the profound influence of national and cultural norms, educational policies, and institutional contexts on fostering education for democracy through ABE pedagogies. They highlighted the necessity for contextually sensitive, phase-specific approaches that recognise the unique challenges and potentials of diverse educational settings. In parallel, the multi-case trials performed across partner countries provided evidence-based insights into AELD implementation, emphasising the need for tools that reflect real-world complexity and support users with varying levels of experience in democratic education.

The transnational conclusions from the WP4 multi-phase trialling now serve as the foundation for co-designing the launch-ready version of the Pedagogical Framework and Guides in the WP5 phase. Informed by the cross-case analysis, this next phase will incorporate design features adaptable to different cultural and country contexts and educational settings, offering differentiated education and learning pathways, and including practical support resources for practitioner users. The collaboration between WP4 and WP5 will ensure that these tools are not only theoretically sound but also responsive to the variety of contexts and educational settings.

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Furthermore, the outcomes of WP4 will reinforce synergies across work packages: WP2 will revisit foundational theory and concepts developed throughout the AECED Project (see Section 2.2) which will inform the dissemination and exploitation processes, and WP5 will validate the Pedagogical Framework and Guides through stakeholder engagement and pilot activities.

In sum, the convergence of insights across all partners marks a pivotal transition – from research to implementation, from case trials to integrated transformation. This collective endeavour establishes a foundation for advancing democratic, embodied, and context-responsive educational practices across Europe.

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