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Learning democracy in early education: aesthetic and embodied pedagogies in teachers' professional learning

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ABSTRACT

This article examines how aesthetic and embodied pedagogies support teachers' professional learning for democratic practice in early childhood and primary education. Drawing on a Participatory Action Research (PAR) design within the Aesthetic and Embodied Learning for Democracy (AELD) strand of the AECED project, the study analyses four cases developed in Portugal and Croatia. The Portuguese cases involved a 50-hour online professional learning course structured around PAR phases, while the Croatian cases consisted of face-to-face workshops using storytelling, drama, movement and reflective dialogue. Data were generated through reflective writings, forum contributions, visual documentation and observational records. Thematic and interpretive cross-case analysis showed that aesthetic and embodied pedagogies supported teachers in developing greater sensitivity to children's perspectives, stronger awareness of participation as a relational and ethical practice and greater willingness to co-construct pedagogical decisions. Findings suggest that professional learning can function as a democratic inquiry shaped by relational and institutional conditions. The article contributes to democratic education scholarship by foregrounding teacher professional learning as a key site where democracy is enacted and interpreted.

KEYWORDS

Democratic pedagogy; teacher professional learning; aesthetic and embodied learning; participatory action research; early childhood pedagogy

SDG KEYWORDS

SDG 4: quality education

1. Introduction

Democratic education in early childhood and primary contexts is increasingly understood not only as the transmission of civic knowledge, but as something enacted in everyday pedagogical relations. Rather than being reduced to formal participation structures or predefined competencies, democracy is approached as a pedagogical practice shaped through interaction, dialogue, recognition, and shared pedagogical interpretation (Biesta 2021; Dewey 1916; Moss 2014). This perspective shifts attention from what is

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taught about democracy to how democratic relations are experienced, negotiated, and sustained in educational settings.

Within this framing, aesthetic and embodied pedagogies have gained increasing attention for their potential to expand how democratic experience is perceived and enacted. These approaches engage learners and educators through sensory, affective, and expressive modes, enabling forms of knowing that are relational, situated, and often difficult to access through discursive or instructional methods alone (Eisner 2002; Greene 1995; Kress 2010; Merleau-Ponty 1962). By foregrounding perception, expression, and relational engagement, they open possibilities for encountering participation, inclusion, and voice in more nuanced and experiential ways.

At the same time, the role of teacher professional learning in democratic education remains underexplored. While much research focuses on children's participation, less attention has been given to how educators themselves learn to engage with democracy as a pedagogical and relational practice. This is significant, as teachers' understandings of participation, inclusion, and dialogue shape the conditions under which democratic experiences become possible in classrooms.

This article addresses this gap by examining how aesthetic and embodied pedagogies support teachers' professional learning for democratic practice. Drawing on four cases developed within the Aesthetic and Embodied Learning for Democracy (AELD) strand of the AECED project in Portugal and Croatia, it asks:

How do aesthetic and embodied pedagogies shape teachers' professional learning for democratic practice in early childhood and primary education?

By focusing on teachers' experiences across different national and pedagogical settings, the article contributes to democratic education scholarship in three ways: it shows how aesthetic and embodied pedagogies make participation more perceptible within professional learning; it conceptualises professional learning as a form of shared democratic inquiry rather than the acquisition of techniques; and it highlights how the possibilities of such learning are shaped by relational and institutional conditions, including modality, legitimacy, and support for co-creation.

2. Theoretical framework: democracy, aesthetic and embodied pedagogy, and professional learning

In early childhood and primary education, democracy is increasingly framed not simply as civic knowledge or formal participation, but as an everyday pedagogical concern shaped through dialogue, belonging, interaction, and ethical relations (Biesta 2021; Dewey 1916; Moss 2014). This perspective shifts attention from democracy as content to be transmitted towards democracy as a mode of being together, enacted through recognition, communication, and shared interpretation of educational experience (Biesta 2021; Noddings 2013). Such an understanding is especially important in early education, where participation is often expressed through gesture, affect, rhythm, play, and interaction as much as through formal language (Kress 2010).

This article draws on three interconnected strands of thought: first, democracy as a relational and participatory practice; second, aesthetic and embodied pedagogies as ways of making democratic experience perceptible; and third, teacher professional

learning as a process of democratic inquiry. The study is situated within the wider Aesthetic and Embodied Learning for Democracy (AELD) strand of the AECED project. Here, however, AELD is not treated as a self-contained theory replacing broader scholarship. Rather, it functions as the project and pedagogical context in which the cases were developed, while the interpretation is grounded in wider literature on democracy, pedagogy, embodiment, and professional learning.

2.1. Democracy as relational and participatory practice

Democracy in education can be understood as an ongoing process of coexistence, co-creation, and shared inquiry. Rather than reducing democracy to voice in a narrow procedural sense, this view emphasises how people learn to live with others through encounters marked by difference, uncertainty, mutuality, and responsibility (Biesta 2021; Dewey 1916). Dewey's conception of democracy as a way of life remains central here, since it frames education as participation in shared social experience rather than simple preparation for future citizenship (Dewey 1916). In a related way, more recent scholarship has highlighted that democracy is not merely taught but enacted in pedagogical relations, especially when learners and educators engage in dialogue, negotiation, and collective interpretation (Biesta 2021; Moss 2014).

In early childhood and primary education, this understanding resonates with relational and participatory traditions that treat children not as passive recipients of instruction but as subjects of experience, interpretation, and contribution (Formosinho 2019; Moss 2014; Noddings 2013). Democratic pedagogy therefore depends not only on formal participation structures but on the quality of the pedagogical relation itself: whether there is room for listening, interruption, recognition, responsiveness, and co-construction. Democracy is not external to pedagogy; it is present in how time, space, authority, and attention are organised within educational life.

This understanding also aligns with the broader AECED conception of democracy-as-becoming. In the project's methodological and conceptual materials, democracy-as-becoming is described as ongoing, embodied, unfinished, and relational rather than as a stable endpoint (AECED 2023; AECED 2025b). It is shaped through reflection, interpretation, dialogue, power-sharing, and responsiveness, and is therefore consistent with educational perspectives that understand democratic learning as an ethical and pedagogical process rather than a fixed outcome. Within this framing, democracy is not simply a topic of instruction; it is something that must be enacted, sensed, and negotiated in practice.

2.2. Aesthetic and embodied pedagogies as democratic pedagogies

If democracy is lived through pedagogical relations, then the forms of pedagogy through which people encounter one another matter deeply. Aesthetic and embodied pedagogies are important because they make visible and experienceable dimensions of learning that are often marginalised in more cognitive or transmission-oriented models. They foreground sensation, affect, imagination, movement, materiality, and perception as integral to how people come to know, respond, and participate (Greene 1995; Merleau-Ponty 1962).

In this article, aesthetic pedagogies refer to approaches in which learning is mediated through sensory attention, image, narrative, artistic representation, metaphor, sound, and creative expression (Eisner 2002; Greene 1995). The aesthetic is not treated here as decoration or enrichment, but as a way of engaging with the world through heightened perception and meaning-making. It opens possibilities for noticing what is usually overlooked, for imagining otherwise, and for developing ethical attentiveness to people, situations, and relations. Embodied pedagogies, in turn, refer to approaches that recognise the body not as secondary to cognition but as a source of knowing, feeling, and responding (Merleau-Ponty 1962). Embodied learning involves gesture, posture, movement, spatial relation, bodily sensation, and affective resonance. It acknowledges that participation is not only verbal or rational but also corporeal.

This distinction is analytical rather than absolute, because aesthetic and embodied dimensions frequently overlap in practice. Storytelling, photography, collage, drama, dance, movement, sensory exploration, and creative writing can all mobilise both aesthetic and embodied ways of knowing. This is also consistent with the AECED methodological framework, where arts-based and embodied pedagogies are defined as approaches that work with feelings, emotions, senses, and the body. These pedagogies matter for democracy because they make participation perceptible beyond formal discussion, helping educators and learners attend to how democratic life is felt in belonging and exclusion, confidence and hesitation, openness and defensiveness, and shared or disrupted relation. They also widen perception by enabling participants to encounter multiple perspectives through experience rather than only through abstract explanation (Eisner 2002; Greene 1995). In the later conceptual development of AECED, this is linked to democratic sensibility: responsiveness to feelings, bodily senses, connectedness, equality of worth, and openness to learning with and from others (AECED 2025a; AECED 2025b).

For early education, these pedagogies are especially relevant because young children's meaning-making is already deeply multimodal, sensory, and relational (Kress 2010). They are equally important in teacher professional learning, since educators also need opportunities to experience democratic practice beyond propositional language. Aesthetic and embodied pedagogies can therefore function as pedagogies of attention and response: they support educators in noticing the affective, sensory, material, and relational textures of practice while also enabling more responsive engagement with others.

2.3. Professional learning as democratic inquiry

Teacher professional learning is not merely a technical matter of acquiring strategies or implementing policy. In democratic terms, it can be understood as a process through which educators develop the dispositions, sensitivities, and relational capacities needed to create more participatory pedagogical environments (Kemmis, McTaggart, and Nixon 2014; Schön 1983). Professional learning becomes democratic when it invites dialogue, co-inquiry, vulnerability, reflection, and shared agency rather than passive compliance. From this perspective, professionalism is not best understood as mastery of standardised techniques, but as an ethical and situated practice involving judgment, attentiveness, and responsibility in relation to others (Formosinho 2019; Schön 1983).

Teachers learn democratically when they participate in forms of inquiry that allow them to question assumptions, experiment collectively, interpret experience, and remain open to being changed by what they encounter (Kemmis, McTaggart, and Nixon 2014). This understanding is strengthened by participatory approaches that position educators as co-researchers rather than passive recipients of innovation. In this sense, participatory inquiry can be understood not only as a method of research but as a professional learning ecology through which educators collectively interpret practice, test pedagogical possibilities, and develop democratic agency in relation to uncertainty and institutional conditions.

Aesthetic and embodied approaches are especially significant within such professional learning because they engage educators not only intellectually but also affectively, sensorially, and relationally. They create opportunities for teachers to experience how democracy is enacted through co-presence, creative risk, mutual interpretation, and shared reflection. The wider AECED framework supports this reading by linking AELD to epistemic transformation, individual and collective professionalisation, and organisational transformation (AECED 2023; AECED 2025b). Seen in this light, professional inquiry becomes one of the sites where democratic relations are practised, tested, and reimaged.

3. Methodology

3.1. *Research design and contexts*

This study adopts a Participatory Action Research (PAR) design grounded in a participatory and interpretive epistemological orientation (Bryman 2012; Kemmis, McTaggart, and Nixon 2014). PAR was selected not only as a methodological approach but also because it aligns with the study's understanding of democracy as relational, dialogical, and enacted in practice. Rather than positioning researchers as external observers, PAR involves participants as active contributors to inquiry through iterative cycles of reflection, action, interpretation, and re-engagement (Chevalier and Buckles 2019; Kemmis, McTaggart, and Nixon 2014).

The study draws on four cases developed within the Aesthetic and Embodied Learning for Democracy (AELD) strand of the AECED project in early childhood and primary education contexts. These include two cases in Portugal (Cases 14–15) and two in Croatia (Cases 1–2), enabling comparative analysis across different national and pedagogical settings.

In Portugal, the cases were developed through a 50-hour accredited online professional learning course delivered over approximately eight weeks via Moodle. The course combined synchronous sessions with asynchronous activities and was structured around successive PAR-informed phases: conceptual exploration, identification of pedagogical questions, development of intervention proposals, implementation in practice, and collective reflection.

In Croatia, the cases were conducted through sequences of face-to-face workshops combined with planning, implementation, and reflection activities. Educators engaged in storytelling, drama, movement, and dialogic reflection across multiple encounters, creating opportunities for embodied and collaborative exploration of participation, inclusion, and democratic practice.

While differing in modality and structure, all four cases shared a commitment to aesthetic and embodied pedagogies as resources for collaborative inquiry into democratic education.

3.2. Participants and data generation

The study includes a total of 33 early childhood and primary educators across the four cases. In Croatia, 21 participants were involved across two cases (11 in Case 1 and 10 in Case 2). In Portugal, 12 educators (10 primary and 2 early childhood) participated in the online course. The analysis focuses on those Portuguese participants who completed all phases of the course and contributed to the full set of data-generating activities.

Across both national contexts, participants worked in diverse educational settings and brought varying levels of professional experience. Consistent with the PAR design, educators were positioned not as research subjects but as co-inquirers who contributed to the generation and interpretation of data through reflection, dialogue, and pedagogical experimentation.

Researchers acted as facilitators, observers, and co-participants. In the Portuguese cases, they designed and facilitated the online course, supported participants' inquiry processes, and guided reflection across PAR phases. In the Croatian cases, they facilitated workshops and participated in collective reflection alongside educators.

Data were generated through multiple and complementary sources. In the Portuguese cases, these included initial survey responses, contributions to asynchronous discussion forums, individual written reflections, pedagogical intervention proposals, photographs and videos documenting practice, observational notes from synchronous sessions, and final presentations. The asynchronous forums functioned as key dialogic spaces in which participants shared reflections, uploaded visual materials, and responded to peers over time.

In the Croatian cases, data included observational records, participant reflections, summaries of group discussions, and artefacts produced through aesthetic and embodied activities such as narratives, drawings, and performative outputs. Documentation of movement- and drama-based activities supported interpretation of embodied engagement.

Across both contexts, the dataset therefore comprised written, visual, dialogic, and embodied materials, allowing analysis to attend not only to what participants said, but also to what they created, enacted, and interpreted collectively.

3.3. Data analysis

Data analysis followed a thematic and interpretive approach (Braun and Clarke 2006), informed by the iterative and collaborative logic of PAR (Kemmis, McTaggart, and Nixon 2014). The aim was not only to identify recurring topics, but to interpret how educators experienced aesthetic and embodied professional learning in relation to democratic practice.

Analysis proceeded through iterative movement between within-case interpretation and cross-case comparison. First, all materials from the Portuguese and Croatian cases were read repeatedly to develop familiarity with the dataset. Second, initial coding identified recurring ideas related to participation, relational dynamics, aesthetic and embodied experience, professional learning, and contextual conditions.

Third, patterns were examined within each case and then compared across cases to develop broader thematic categories. Finally, themes were interpreted comparatively in order to identify shared dynamics as well as context-specific variations. This process was both inductive and conceptually informed, drawing on the study's framing of democracy as relational practice, aesthetic and embodied pedagogy, and professional inquiry as an ethical and participatory process.

This iterative analysis was further supported by collaborative reflection within the research team and by the wider AECED analytical framework, which emphasises cross-case synthesis across participatory research processes.

3.4. Ethical considerations

Ethical approval was obtained through the relevant institutional procedures, and all participants provided informed consent prior to participation. However, given the participatory and relational nature of the study, ethics were approached not only procedurally but as an ongoing practice of attentiveness to participants' agency, comfort, and right to withdraw.

Particular care was taken in activities involving personal reflection, creative expression, sensory engagement, and embodied participation. Researchers also considered the ethical implications of using visual materials and classroom documentation, especially where individuals or contexts might be identifiable. All data were anonymised, and sensitive materials were handled with care.

Where research activities intersected with pedagogical work involving children, the study was additionally informed by the EECERA Ethical Code for Early Childhood Researchers, particularly in relation to children's rights, well-being, respectful documentation, and representation. Data management complied with GDPR requirements.

4. Findings: aesthetic and embodied professional learning as democratic practice

The analysis identified four interconnected themes across the Portuguese and Croatian cases. These themes are not discrete categories but overlapping dimensions of how educators experienced aesthetic and embodied pedagogies in relation to democratic practice. Across the dataset, professional learning emerged as a relational process shaped through pedagogical noticing, co-creation, reflection, and the conditions of participation.

A brief cross-context vignette illustrates how these processes unfolded in practice. In one Portuguese case, educators documented moments of participation through photographs and short reflections shared in asynchronous online forums. These materials were later revisited in synchronous sessions, where participants discussed how participation was shaped not only by children's actions but also by the organisation of time, space, and adult expectations. In the Croatian workshops, educators engaged in drama- and movement-based activities that invited them to position themselves physically in relation to questions of inclusion, responsibility, and dialogue, followed by collective reflection on these experiences. Although these formats differed, both approached participation as contextually embedded and affectively charged rather than as an abstract principle.

4.1. Aesthetic encounter and pedagogical noticing

Across the cases, aesthetic activities such as photography, collage, storytelling, and visual documentation supported educators in reinterpreting participation within their pedagogical contexts. Rather than focusing only on visible or verbal engagement, participants became more aware of subtle dynamics of inclusion, exclusion, and presence.

In the Portuguese online cases, educators used photographs, collage, and digital storytelling to revisit classroom situations and reflect on what these revealed about children's visibility and belonging. One participant observed: *'When I looked at my photos beside my colleagues', I realised how differently we see the same space – and how much of the children's world remains invisible'*. Here, visual artefacts functioned as mediating tools that slowed perception and enabled comparison, opening space for questioning what had initially been taken for granted. In both asynchronous forums and synchronous sessions, images became prompts for collective interpretation rather than simple illustrations of practice.

A related process emerged in the Croatian workshops, where storytelling and embodied exercises enabled participants to explore pedagogical situations from multiple perspectives. Participation became perceptible through proximity, hesitation, openness, and response, rather than through formal indicators alone. Reflection moments built into activities on identity, communication, and dialogue reinforced the connection between experience and pedagogical interpretation.

Together, these examples suggest that aesthetic engagement expanded educators' perceptual field, allowing them to attend to dimensions of participation that might otherwise remain unnoticed.

4.2. Co-creation and shared professional agency

A second theme concerns co-creation as a central dimension of professional learning. Across the cases, educators moved from individual reflection towards collaborative inquiry in which ideas were developed, challenged, and reworked collectively.

In the Portuguese asynchronous forums, participants did not simply share reflections; they engaged with one another's contributions, extending interpretations and reconsidering assumptions. One participant explained, *'Each time someone responded to my reflection, I felt part of a learning community'*, while another noted that colleagues' responses helped her rethink her initial interpretations. These exchanges indicate that the online environment supported not only communication but also a sense of relational presence and shared inquiry.

This dynamic continued in synchronous sessions, where participants revisited forum materials and collectively interpreted classroom situations. Professional learning thus shifted from reporting practice to negotiating its meaning in dialogue with others.

In the Croatian workshops, co-creation took a more explicitly embodied form. Educators worked together to develop short dramatic or narrative representations of pedagogical dilemmas, negotiating roles, movement, and meaning collaboratively. This required listening, adaptation, and trust, reinforcing the collective nature of the inquiry process.

Across both contexts, co-creation redistributed agency within professional learning. It positioned educators as contributors to shared interpretation rather than as recipients of predefined approaches.

4.3. Reflection as relational and ethical practice

Reflection emerged as a third central theme, not as an individual cognitive activity but as a relational and ethical process shaped through interaction and experience.

In the Portuguese cases, reflective writing in forums was closely tied to peer interaction. Participants' interpretations evolved through dialogue, with reflections being revisited and reconsidered in light of others' perspectives. One teacher wrote, *'Someone's story resonated with mine and made me realise how listening changes what we see'*. In some instances, an activity initially described as inclusive was later reinterpreted after colleagues identified overlooked moments of exclusion.

In the Croatian workshops, reflection was often grounded in embodied experience. After movement- and drama-based activities, participants discussed how their physical positioning, gestures, and responses shaped inclusion and participation. One participant noted, *'I understood that inclusion starts in how I move and respond'*. Here, reflection connected bodily experience with ethical awareness.

Across the cases, reflection functioned as a process of ethical re-positioning, through which educators reconsidered their role in shaping participation, inclusion, and pedagogical relations.

4.4. Contextual conditions and the fragility of participation

The final theme highlights how the possibilities of aesthetic and embodied professional learning were shaped by contextual conditions, particularly modality and institutional setting. Participation emerged not as a stable achievement, but as something contingent on the conditions under which professional learning was organised.

In the Portuguese online context, asynchronous forums enabled sustained dialogue and flexibility, allowing participants to revisit discussions and respond over time. This supported reflective exchange and broadened access. At the same time, technological and infrastructural constraints influenced participation, shaping who could contribute and how.

In the Croatian cases, face-to-face workshops enabled direct engagement with movement, improvisation, and co-presence. These conditions supported forms of embodied immediacy and relational intensity that were more difficult to achieve online. However, participants also identified institutional constraints, including limited time and rigid curricular structures, which affected the sustainability of such approaches in everyday practice.

These findings indicate that aesthetic and embodied pedagogies do not automatically produce democratic learning. Their potential depends on relational grounding, facilitation, time, trust, and institutional openness. Participation, in this sense, is not secured by method alone but mediated by the conditions in which pedagogical practices are enacted.

5. Discussion

This study set out to examine how aesthetic and embodied pedagogies support teachers' professional learning for democratic practice in early and primary education. The findings suggest that these pedagogies do not simply diversify professional learning methods; they reshape how educators perceive, experience, and enact participation as a relational and ethical practice. In this respect, the study supports theoretical perspectives that understand democracy in education as something enacted through everyday pedagogical relations rather than transmitted as content (Biesta 2021; Dewey 1916; Moss 2014). It also resonates with the wider AECED framing of democracy-as-becoming as emergent, embodied, and unfinished.

A first contribution of the study is to show that educators' understandings of participation shifted from a mainly procedural focus towards a more relational and interpretive one. Participation became visible not only through observable involvement, but through subtler dynamics of recognition, hesitation, exclusion, presence, and response. Aesthetic practices such as photography, collage, storytelling, and visual documentation slowed perception and reopened situations to interpretation, while embodied activities foregrounded how participation is also lived through movement, rhythm, proximity, affect, and bodily co-presence. In this sense, aesthetic and embodied pedagogies deepened perceptual and relational engagement: they expanded what educators were able to notice and how they interpreted and acted within pedagogical situations. This extends existing discussions of democratic pedagogy by showing that teachers, like children, may need opportunities to encounter democracy as something sensed and enacted, not only discussed or prescribed.

A second contribution concerns the character of professional learning itself. The study indicates that democratic pedagogy is learned democratically: through co-inquiry, shared interpretation, vulnerability, and negotiated meaning-making rather than through transmission alone. Across the Portuguese and Croatian cases, participants developed understandings of practice in dialogue with others, whether through asynchronous forum exchanges, synchronous discussion, or collaborative embodied workshop activities. Professional learning therefore emerged not simply as the acquisition of techniques, but as a form of democratic professional inquiry in which educators developed stronger relational judgment, ethical responsibility, and openness to others (Formosinho 2019; Kemmis, McTaggart, and Nixon 2014; Schön 1983). This interpretation is also consistent with the broader AECED orientation, which links participatory inquiry and aesthetic and embodied learning to epistemic, professional, and organisational transformation.

The findings further suggest that reflection within professional learning is not best understood as an individual cognitive act, but as a relational and ethical practice. Participants' interpretations changed through interaction with peers, through re-engagement with visual and narrative materials, and through embodied experience. Reflection thus became a way of recognising one's own role in enabling or constraining participation. This is important for democratic education because it locates teacher learning within questions of relation, judgment, and responsibility, rather than reducing it to the implementation of participatory techniques.

A further discussion point concerns modality and context. The Portuguese online cases indicate that digital environments can support sustained dialogue, flexibility, and

reflective depth, especially through asynchronous forums that allow participants to revisit discussions and respond over time. However, the findings also suggest that online settings may constrain some of the embodied and affective dimensions central to aesthetic-democratic learning. Movement, spatial relation, shared atmosphere, immediacy, and bodily co-presence were more difficult to reproduce digitally, and broader AECED analyses also point to technological and infrastructural constraints shaping who can participate and how. By contrast, the Croatian face-to-face workshops enabled direct engagement with movement, improvisation, co-presence, and collective energy, while also being shaped by institutional limits such as time pressure, curricular rigidity, and the challenge of sustaining such work in routine practice. Rather than positioning these modalities in opposition, the study suggests that they offer complementary affordances and constraints. Digital environments may support continuity, accessibility, and reflective depth, while face-to-face contexts may support embodied immediacy, relational intensity, and shared rhythm. Designing democratic professional learning therefore requires attentiveness to the strengths and limits of different modalities, especially when aesthetic and embodied approaches are central to the learning design.

These findings also have broader implications for democratic education and teacher learning. They suggest that fostering democratic pedagogy requires more than introducing participatory activities or discussing democratic values at the level of principle. It involves creating conditions in which educators can engage in collaborative, affective, sensory, and interpretive forms of inquiry that allow them to experience democracy as a form of enacted pedagogical relation. At the same time, such work depends on supportive conditions: time, facilitation, trust, openness to uncertainty, and institutional recognition all matter in shaping whether aesthetic and embodied professional learning can be sustained meaningfully in practice.

This study has several limitations. It is based on a small number of cases in two national contexts, so the findings are analytically rich rather than broadly generalisable. The cases also differ in modality, with the Portuguese work conducted online and the Croatian work face-to-face, which makes comparison productive but not symmetrical. In addition, much of the dataset was generated through participatory and reflective processes, which are appropriate to the study's aims but may privilege articulated experience over dimensions of practice not captured in the available materials. Finally, because the study is situated within the conceptual and organisational context of AECED, the transferability of the findings depends on the extent to which other professional learning environments share similar commitments to participation, co-creation, and aesthetic and embodied inquiry.

6. Conclusion

This study set out to examine how aesthetic and embodied pedagogies support teachers' professional learning for democratic practice in early childhood and primary education. The findings suggest that these pedagogies do not simply diversify professional learning methods; they reshape how educators perceive, interpret, and enact participation as a relational and ethical practice. In this respect, the study supports theoretical perspectives that understand democracy in education as something enacted through everyday pedagogical relations rather than transmitted as content (Biesta 2021; Dewey 1916; Moss 2014).

A first contribution of the study is to show that educators' understandings of participation shifted from a primarily procedural perspective towards a more relational and interpretive one. Participation became visible not only through observable involvement, but through subtler dynamics of recognition, hesitation, exclusion, and presence. Aesthetic and embodied practices played a key role in this shift by expanding perceptual engagement: they enabled educators to notice how participation is shaped through affect, movement, spatial arrangement, and interaction, rather than through formal structures alone. This extends existing discussions of democratic pedagogy by demonstrating that teachers, like children, may need opportunities to experience participation as something sensed and interpreted, not only discussed.

A second contribution concerns the character of professional learning itself. The study indicates that democratic pedagogy is learned through participatory and collaborative processes rather than through transmission. Across the cases, educators developed understanding through co-inquiry, shared interpretation, and negotiated meaning in dialogue with others. Professional learning therefore emerged as a form of democratic professional inquiry in which educators developed relational judgment, ethical responsibility, and openness to alternative perspectives. This supports approaches that position teacher learning as an ongoing, situated, and collective process rather than a linear acquisition of skills (Formosinho 2019; Kemmis, McTaggart, and Nixon 2014; Schön 1983).

The findings further suggest that reflection functioned as a key mechanism through which participants reinterpreted practice collectively rather than individually. Through dialogue, aesthetic mediation, and embodied experience, educators reconsidered their assumptions and recognised their role in shaping participation and inclusion. Reflection, in this sense, operated as a relational and ethical process, linking perception, interpretation, and responsibility within pedagogical contexts.

A further discussion point concerns modality and context. The Portuguese online cases indicate that digital environments can support sustained dialogue, flexibility, and extended reflection, particularly through asynchronous forums that allow participants to revisit and respond to ideas over time. However, these environments also reconfigure participation by reducing sensory and relational cues and requiring more deliberate structuring of interaction. In contrast, the Croatian face-to-face workshops enabled direct engagement with movement, co-presence, and shared atmosphere, supporting forms of embodied immediacy and relational intensity that were less accessible online. At the same time, institutional constraints such as limited time and curricular pressures shaped the extent to which such approaches could be sustained in practice. Rather than positioning these modalities in opposition, the findings suggest that they offer different affordances and constraints. Designing democratic professional learning therefore requires attention to relational grounding, institutional openness, and the legitimacy afforded to experimentation and co-creation across contexts.

These findings have broader implications for democratic education and teacher learning. They suggest that fostering democratic pedagogy requires more than introducing participatory techniques or discussing democratic values at the level of principle. It involves creating conditions in which educators can engage in collaborative, affective, and interpretive forms of inquiry that allow them to experience democracy as enacted pedagogical practice. Such work depends on time, facilitation, trust, and institutional support, all of which shape whether democratic professional learning can be sustained meaningfully.

This study has several limitations. It is based on a small number of cases in two national contexts, and the findings are therefore analytically rich rather than broadly generalisable. The cases also differ in modality, which makes comparison productive but not symmetrical. In addition, the participatory nature of the data may privilege articulated experiences over aspects of practice that remain less visible in documentation. Even so, the study offers conceptually transferable insights into how aesthetic and embodied pedagogies may be designed within democratic professional learning across different educational settings.

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