

# EARLY YEARS AND PRIMARY EDUCATION GUIDE

## ***GROWING DEMOCRACY FROM THE START (AGES 3–10)***



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This document is designed to support use with read-aloud tools and assistive technologies. The text is organised in a clear, numbered structure and presented in a logical reading order to support audio reading. Images and diagrams include alternative text where they carry meaning.

For enhanced navigation, an accessible Word version is also available on request.

All diagrams and tables in this document are accompanied by short explanatory text to ensure accessibility for readers using screen readers or read-aloud tools.

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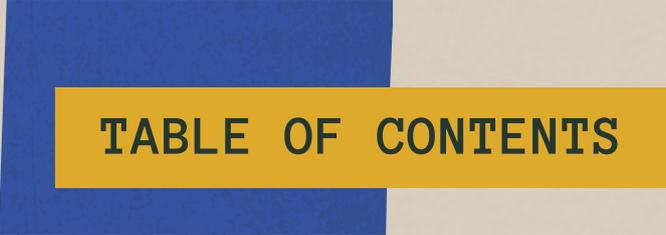


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## 1 . INTRODUCTION

Early years and primary classrooms are the first shared spaces where children encounter what it means to live, learn, and participate with others. In these environments, democracy is not experienced through formal institutions or procedures, but through everyday encounters: sharing materials, negotiating space, taking turns, expressing feelings, imagining possibilities, and resolving small conflicts. These micro-moments allow children to feel a sense of belonging, fairness, agency, and care.

Aesthetic and Embodied Learning for Democracy (AELD) builds on this understanding. Young children make meaning through their bodies, senses, emotions, gestures, and imaginations. When they move, play, draw, act, or tell stories, they are not only learning content — they are participating in a community. Their gestures, silences, choices, and collaborations reveal early forms of democratic understanding: how to listen, how to include others, how to express a need, how to negotiate perspectives, and how to shape shared experience.

For this reason, early childhood is a powerful moment for democracy-as-becoming. Long before democratic ideas can be articulated, children experience democracy as lived and embodied. AELD affirms that these early encounters form the ground for democratic sensibility — the child's emerging ability to notice fairness and exclusion, to respond to others' emotions, to take perspective, and to participate with care and responsibility.

This Guide supports educators for democracy in creating environments where democracy is not postponed but lived now. Through simple routines, multimodal invitations, and responsive interactions, children learn to participate as valued members of a collective world. AELD does not ask educators to add new subjects or extra tasks; instead, it reframes what already happens in classrooms — play, dialogue, cooperation, creative exploration — so that the democratic potential of these practices becomes visible and intentional.

Ultimately, this Guide invites educators for democracy to recognise, trust, and nurture the aesthetic and embodied ways in which children connect with one another. Democracy grows through these small interactions — through the rhythms of play, the courage to express a feeling, the gentleness of listening, and the shared imagination that holds a group together. AELD helps educators for democracy see these everyday interactions as opportunities to cultivate democratic life from the very beginning.

## A BRIEF INTRODUCTION TO AELD

Aesthetic and Embodied Learning for Democracy (AELD) recognises that children learn to participate in democratic life through their bodies, senses, emotions, relationships, and imagination.

In early years and primary settings, democracy is not abstract — it emerges in how children negotiate space, express feelings, listen to others, make choices, and engage in shared activities.

AELD brings together:

- **democratic values** (freedom, equality and equity, responsiveness)
- **democratic principles** (power-sharing, transforming dialogue, holistic learning, relational well-being)
- **democratic sensibility** — children’s embodied awareness of fairness, belonging, and responsibility
- **responsive pedagogy** — tuning into children’s rhythms, emotions, and cues
- **the acceptive gaze** — seeing others with openness, curiosity, and respect

This Guide shows how these concepts can take shape in everyday practice with children aged 3–10.

## HOW TO USE THIS GUIDE

You may enter this Guide in different ways depending on your needs:

- **Quick start:** Go directly to the sections presenting practices and working examples.
- **Conceptual grounding:** Consult the sections on democratic values, principles, and democratic sensibility.
- **Design support:** Explore the pathways and examples illustrating how AELD can be enacted.
- **Reflection:** Use the educator prompts to deepen awareness of democratic processes in daily classroom life.
- **Extended tools:** Look for references to the Practice Companion additional materials, templates, and activity variations.

This Guide is modular and can be read linearly or consulted as needed.

## AUDIENCE

This Guide supports:

- educators in early years and primary education settings, educators for democracy and assistants
- daycare and school leaders (principals, heads, ECEC directors/coordinators) who help shape democratic conditions for learning
- cultural, artistic, and community partners
- families and caregivers interested in children’s early democratic experiences

In this guide, ‘educators for democracy’ refers to teachers, educational practitioners, and adults who intentionally cultivate democratic life in everyday learning.

# ABOUT THE PEDAGOGICAL ECOLOGY OF AELD

Aesthetic and Embodied Learning for Democracy (AELD) is supported by a three-part pedagogical ecology:

## The Pedagogical Framework

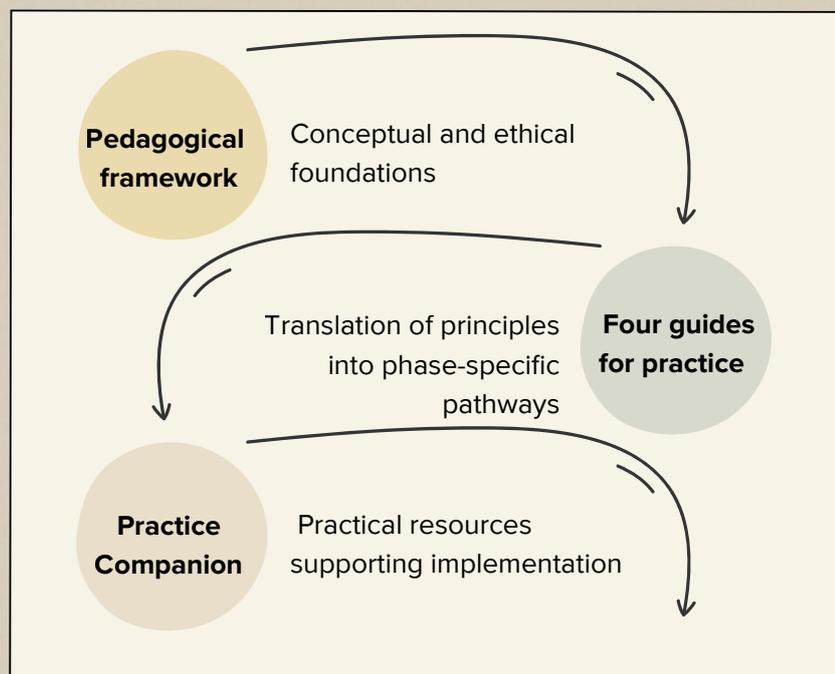
Sets out the conceptual foundations of AELD, including democratic values, democratic principles, democratic sensibility, responsive pedagogy, and the acceptive gaze. These concepts guide all phase-specific Guides.

## Phase-Specific Guides

Translate the Framework into pathways suited to different educational contexts: Early Years and Primary, Secondary, Higher Education, and Adult and Professional Learning. This Guide focuses on children aged 3–10, helping educators for democracy cultivate democratic sensibility through everyday embodied and relational experiences.

## The Practice Companion

Provides transversal tools to support implementation, including activity cards, templates, extended examples, and planning resources. Short examples appear in this Guide; longer materials, variations, and templates can be found in the Practice Companion.



Together these layers form a living ecology of Aesthetic and Embodied Learning for Democracy (AELD).

This diagram shows how the Pedagogical Framework, phase-specific Guides, and the Practice Companion work together as a three-part ecology supporting AELD implementation.



# **AELD IN ONE PAGE EARLY YEARS AND PRIMARY (3–10)**

The next page summarises the key concepts and practices of AELD for ages 3–10.

## A QUICK MAP OF WHAT MATTERS AND HOW IT COMES ALIVE IN PRACTICE

### **Democratic values – The foundation**

These values shape how we see children and how learning environments welcome them.

- freedom – Space for exploration, choice, movement, and imagination within caring boundaries
- equality & Equity – Every child's presence matters; participation becomes possible through multiple expressive routes
- responsiveness – educators for democracy and children adjust to one another's cues, rhythms, emotions, and ideas

### **Democratic principles – How values become practice**

- power-sharing – Children influence decisions, roles, and the flow of daily life
- transforming Dialogue – Dialogue unfolds through words, gesture, drawing, movement, storytelling, and wonder
- holistic Learning – Thinking, sensing, feeling, and imagining work together
- relational Well-being – Safety, trust, and mutual care are treated as essential conditions

### **Democratic sensibility – What children are growing up with**

A felt, embodied awareness of:

- fairness and inclusion/exclusion
- emotions (their own and others')
- perspective-taking and empathy
- responsibility for shared spaces
- belonging to a community

This is the core developmental outcome of AELD in this phase.

### **Environments that**

- invite participation ("You belong here")
- support multimodal expression (many ways to speak)
- provide rhythmic flexibility (time for depth, return, repetition)
- hold relationships with care (spaces of emotional safety)
- welcome imagination as a form of knowledge
- embody the acceptive gaze (children's work and presence valued)

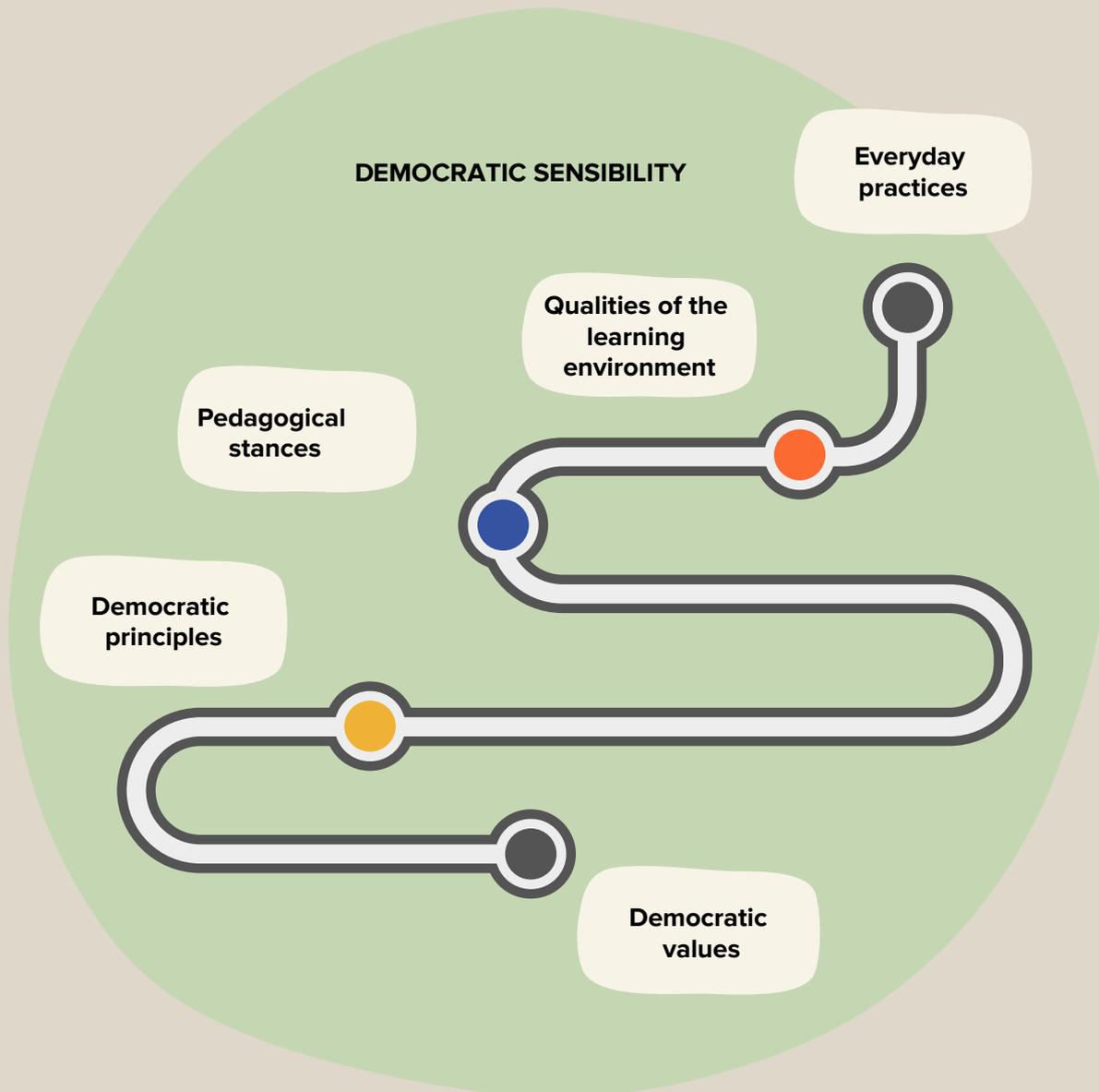
### **Everyday practices – Where democracy lives**

- story circles, emotion check-ins, mini-councils
- movement, drawing, building, drama, play
- rotating roles and shared routines
- conflict negotiation with soft eyes and careful listening
- micro-practices of care: giving space, offering help, noticing others

### **Pedagogical stances – How educators for democracy "stand" in AELD**

- co-learners who explore with children
- designers of aesthetic, multimodal, responsive environments
- facilitators of agency, not distributors of tasks
- practitioners of the reciprocal acceptive gaze, modelling and teaching soft, respectful seeing
- builders of collaborative climates with colleagues and families

## PATHWAY TO CULTIVATING DEMOCRACY IN EARLY YEARS AND PRIMARY EDUCATION



This diagram of a stepping-stone pathway shows how democracy is cultivated through everyday educational life. Democratic values provide the foundation, democratic principles translate values into practice, and the outcome is children’s democratic sensibility. The figure highlights three key areas that shape this process: educators’ pedagogical stances, the qualities of the learning environment, and everyday practices that enact democracy.

## 2. WHY AELD MATTERS IN EARLY YEARS AND PRIMARY EDUCATION

Early years and primary education offer a unique window into democratic life. Children aged 3–10 learn through movement, play, sensory exploration, relationships, rhythms, emotions, and imagination. Long before democratic ideas can be expressed verbally, children experience democracy as something that is felt in the body and lived with others.

AELD recognises that these early forms of learning are not separate from democratic development — they are foundational to it. Children encounter democracy daily as they negotiate space, express needs, collaborate, listen, manage conflict, or join a shared activity. These encounters shape their emerging democratic sensibility: the embodied awareness of fairness, belonging, responsibility, and connection.

In this phase, democracy is experienced through everyday life:

- in the way a child offers space to a peer
- in the shared rhythm of a group building something together
- in the courage to voice a feeling
- in the imagination that allows children to explore different perspectives
- in the collective effort to repair a conflict

Such moments deepen children’s understanding of agency and participation. They help them learn that their presence matters, their actions influence the group, and their feelings and ideas shape shared experiences.

AELD supports this democratic learning by strengthening the conditions that make participation possible:

- belonging and emotional safety, so children feel invited to engage
- multiple expressive languages, so all children — including multilingual learners and those who communicate non-verbally — have meaningful ways to contribute
- relational trust is built through the reciprocal receptive gaze
- flexible time and pace, allowing emotions, questions, and ideas to unfold
- attentive responsiveness, where children's cues guide the flow of learning

When these conditions are present, democracy becomes something children can do rather than something they only hear about. They practice listening, negotiating, taking responsibility, and caring for others — skills that naturally grow from embodied, relational, and imaginative experiences.

AELD does not add extracurricular content. Instead, it offers educators for democracy a way to recognise and intentionally cultivate the democratic possibilities already embedded in everyday routines, interactions, and creative processes. Familiar activities — storytelling, drawing, movement, collaborative play — become opportunities for deeper participation, empathy, perspective taking, and shared meaning-making.

Ultimately, AELD matters in early years and primary education because it ensures that democracy is not postponed. Children learn democracy by living it: through gesture, imagination, emotion, presence, collaboration, and the shared fabric of everyday classroom life.

## EVIDENCE THAT INFORMS THIS GUIDE

This Guide is grounded in field-based evidence gathered from early years and primary settings across the AECED project. Observations, children's actions, and reflections from educators for democracy and local dialogues revealed recurring patterns in how democratic learning emerges in everyday practice. Across contexts, we learned that:

- Children express democratic understanding through movement, gesture, story, and play. Their multimodal participation shows early forms of negotiation, empathy, and shared meaning-making.
- Emotional safety and gentle pacing matter. Children engage more deeply when rhythms slow down, when hesitation is welcomed, and when relational trust is present.
- Multimodal pathways strengthen equity. Offering diverse ways to participate — drawing, movement, sound, building, storytelling — supports inclusion and enables children with different communication styles to contribute meaningfully.
- Educators' responsiveness shapes democratic possibility. Attunement, acceptance, and flexibility create conditions in which children's democratic sensibility can grow.
- Shared activities make democratic processes visible. Collaborative play, collective building, and joint storytelling help children practise perspective-taking, responsibility, and care.

These insights inform the values, principles, examples, and practices described throughout this Guide.

## INTRODUCING DEMOCRATIC WORK RESPONSIBLY

Across the AECED project, educators for democracy highlighted that democratic work in schools can be misunderstood as political messaging or ideological instruction. This concern is especially present in contexts where democracy is a sensitive topic or where educators for democracy fear judgement for addressing it. To avoid these misunderstandings, AELD frames democracy as a relational, human, and everyday practice rather than a political position.

In early years and primary settings, democratic learning emerges through children's gestures, emotions, choices, stories, negotiations, and shared activities. It is felt in how children include one another, navigate conflict, express ideas, and participate in the collective life of the group. Introducing democratic work responsibly means helping children experience these forms of belonging, fairness, and care without linking them to formal institutions, party politics, or ideological debates.

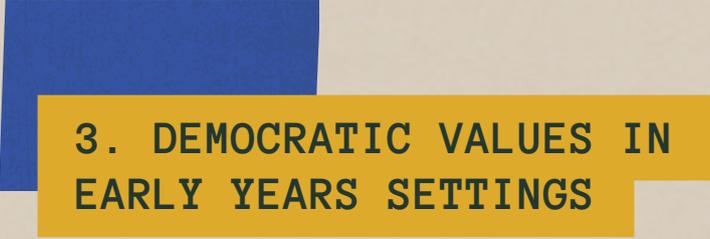
Framing democracy as everyday relational life builds trust with families, communities, and colleagues. It reassures educators for democracy that AELD does not ask them to teach political content, but to support children in developing the sensibilities and capacities that make democratic participation possible.



## AESTHETIC AND EMBODIED PRACTICES ARE FOR EVERYONE

Aesthetic and embodied practices in AELD do not require artistic expertise, special skills, or particular talents. They are part of everyday life in early years and primary settings: the way children move, gesture, play, draw, build, imagine, and relate. These practices are accessible to all children and educators and support democracy by drawing on the body, senses, emotions, and shared experiences that everyone brings to the learning environment. Framing aesthetics in this inclusive way helps remove pressure or fear. It supports equity — ensuring that every child and educator can participate meaningfully in democratic learning through simple, ordinary, embodied interactions.





### 3. DEMOCRATIC VALUES IN EARLY YEARS SETTINGS

Democratic values guide how children and educators for democracy participate, relate to, and coexist in early years and primary settings. In AELD, values are not taught as abstract ideas. Instead, they are felt, enacted, and experienced in daily interactions, creative processes, and the shared rhythms of classroom life.

The AECED Pedagogical Framework identifies three core democratic values:

1. Freedom
2. Equality and Equity
3. Responsiveness

These values shape the conditions in which children learn to participate as members of a democratic community.

## FREEDOM

Freedom in early childhood is not unlimited choice or unstructured autonomy. In AELD, freedom means having space to express oneself, experiment, contribute, and move within a community that honours each child's way of being. Children experience freedom through multiple expressive languages — gesture, movement, drawing, sound, story, materials — and through opportunities to influence shared activity.

Freedom grows when children feel safe to take initiative, explore uncertainty, test ideas, negotiate possibilities, and bring their unique perspectives into the group.

AECED Case 14/15: Portugal - Early Years and Primary Education.

Practice example illustrating how democratic sensibility emerges through children's embodied, relational, and imaginative interactions in everyday classroom life.

**During a movement-based session, the educator invites children to explore how bodies “make space” for each other. As the group moves, some children notice moments of being drawn into the circle — and moments of being left outside it. The educator pauses the activity and invites children to name what felt inclusive or excluding. The class then tries again, adjusting their movements so joining becomes easier. Here, democracy is learned as a felt experience of power and belonging — not just a spoken rule.**

## EQUALITY AND EQUITY

Equality and equity refer to children's right to participate meaningfully, regardless of language, background, communicative style, or developmental pace. In AELD:

- Equality ensures every child's presence and contribution matter.
- Equity ensures each child has the support they need to participate fully.

These values become visible in how children share space, how educators for democracy attune to quieter or more hesitant children, and how classroom structures allow multiple ways to engage. Equity is enacted when educators for democracy adjust conditions — materials, timing, groupings, invitations — so that all children can participate with dignity.

AECED Case 14/15: Portugal - Early Years and Primary Education.

Practice example illustrating how democratic sensibility emerges through children's embodied, relational, and imaginative interactions in everyday classroom life.

**A group creates a shared mural about “living well together.” Children propose colours, symbols, and where elements should go. When two ideas clash, the educator does not decide for them; instead, the group experiments with alternatives (moving pieces, layering shapes, combining motifs). The final mural carries visible traces of negotiation — a collective decision made through trying, listening, and revising. In this moment, children practise agency with responsibility, because each choice changes the common space.**

## RESPONSIVENESS

Responsiveness is the value that makes democratic life possible in early years settings. It means attuning to children's cues, emotions, rhythms, hesitations, and emerging meanings, and responding in ways that honour their agency and relational needs.

Responsiveness is not passive — it is a democratic stance. Educators for democracy and children co-create meaning by noticing and adjusting to one another. Through responsiveness, children learn that:

- their feelings matter
- their ideas influence others
- they can help shape the unfolding activity
- relationships require attention and care

Responsiveness lays the foundation for democratic sensibility by teaching children to listen, consider others' experiences, and act with awareness of the group.

AECED Case 14/15: Portugal - Early Years and Primary Education.

Practice example illustrating how democratic sensibility emerges through children's embodied, relational, and imaginative interactions in everyday classroom life.

**Children create drawings (or take photos) of places in school where they feel safe, heard, or overlooked. In a circle, they share one image each and explain what it shows. The educator helps the group notice patterns (“many of us chose the same corner”, “some places feel closed”). Together, they choose one small change to try next week (e.g., a new “welcome space,” different ways to invite someone into play). The image becomes a democratic tool: it makes feelings discussable and turns noticing into collective action.**

These values do not appear separately in children's experience. They intertwine in daily life: freedom needs equity; equity requires responsiveness; responsiveness strengthens freedom. Together they create the democratic conditions that allow children to participate, imagine, negotiate, and develop democratic sensibility in embodied, relational ways.

## 4. DEMOCRATIC PRINCIPLES IN EARLY YEARS AND PRIMARY EDUCATION

Democratic principles describe how democratic values are enacted in everyday pedagogical life. They make the values of freedom, equality and equity, and responsiveness operational in early years and primary classrooms. These principles help educators for democracy shape interactions, environments, and routines so that children experience democracy not as an abstract idea but as a way of living together.

According to the AECED Pedagogical Framework, AELD is grounded in four democratic principles:

1. power-sharing
2. transforming dialogue
3. Holistic learning
4. Relational well-being



These principles support children's democratic sensibility and guide the design of activities, environments, and educator responses.

## POWER SHARING

**During a collaborative building activity, a child suggests tilting the structure to “make it look like it’s listening.” The group pauses and tries it out, adjusting angles and testing what changes. The educator follows the children’s lead, asking what they notice and what they want to try next. The child’s imaginative contribution reshapes the shared plan and becomes part of the group’s decision-making. In this moment, power-sharing is visible: a child’s idea changes what is possible for everyone.**

**AECED Case 14/15: Portugal - Early Years and Primary Education.**

Power-sharing means creating conditions where children can influence the direction, pace, and meaning of shared activities. Rather than directing every step, educators for democracy make space for children’s ideas, questions, emotions, and emerging initiatives. Power-sharing is not the absence of leadership — it is a relational distribution of agency.

In early years and primary settings, power-sharing is experienced when:

- children’s ideas meaningfully shape group decisions
- materials and spaces can be used flexibly
- routines allow for co-created agreements
- educators for democracy follow children’s cues rather than imposing predetermined outcomes

Power-sharing strengthens children’s sense of agency, responsibility, and belonging.

## TRANSFORMING DIALOGUE

**After reading a story in which a character faces a difficult choice, the teacher invites children to write (or dictate) a short letter to the character. Children offer different advice and explain why: some focus on fairness, others on care or courage. As they read their letters aloud, the dialogue shifts — children begin responding to one another’s reasons, not just stating opinions. The teacher helps them notice how feelings and values shape decisions, and the class revisits the story moment with new possibilities. Here, dialogue becomes transformative: the group learns to stay with disagreement, listen for reasons, and revise what they think together.**

**AECED Case 2: Croatia - Primary Education.**

Transforming dialogue refers to communication that changes something — a perspective, a feeling, a relationship, or the shared direction of an activity. It involves listening, interpreting, asking questions, responding, and allowing new meanings to emerge.

Dialogue becomes transforming when:

- children’s stories reshape group understanding
- disagreements lead to new insights
- emotions are acknowledged and worked through together
- non-verbal expressions (gesture, rhythm, drawing) are recognised as contributions

In AELD, dialogue is multimodal, embodied, and affective — not limited to spoken language.

## HOLISTIC LEARNING

Holistic learning recognises that children think, feel, move, imagine, and relate as integrated processes. Knowledge does not come only through verbal reasoning, but also through embodied, emotional, sensory, and imaginative experiences.

Holistic learning is democratic because it:

- values multiple forms of intelligence
- enables full participation of children who communicate differently
- honours the whole child, not only their cognitive performance
- supports creativity, empathy, and relational understanding

In AELD, holistic learning integrates sensory exploration, movement, narrative, art, play, and reflection to foster a comprehensive approach to learning.

**The class creates a “role-on-the-wall” figure representing a community member (e.g., a newcomer, a quiet child, a class helper). Children add words or images inside the outline (feelings/needs) and outside it (what others assume). In “hot seat,” classmates ask the character questions: What do you wish others noticed? What feels unfair? The educator supports children to speak to the role, not about the person, keeping emotional safety. Through drama, children practise seeing the other and recognising how voice and status shape participation.**

**AECED Case 2: Croatia - Primary Education.**

## RELATIONAL WELL-BEING

**After a fast-paced drama game, the educator calls “Minute, please.” Children freeze, breathe, and each offers one word: “left out,” “excited,” “confused,” “proud.” The educator chooses two words to open a short exchange: What made someone feel included? What made someone feel small? The group then repeats the activity with one agreed change to make participation easier. Democracy appears here as practice + revision: the class learns to adjust the conditions of play so more children can belong.**

**AECED Case 2: Croatia - Primary Education.**

Relational well-being refers to the quality of relationships in the classroom — between children, between children and educators for democracy, and within the group as a whole. It emerges through care, trust, listening, attunement, and shared rhythms.

Relational well-being supports democracy because:

- children feel safe to participate when they feel seen and accepted
- conflicts can be approached with empathy, supporting the repair of relationships
- belonging allows for freedom and risk-taking
- mutual attention fosters cooperation

This principle is deeply linked to the acceptive gaze and responsive pedagogy, which help create a climate where children can flourish.

These four principles help educators for democracy design environments and interactions where children can genuinely participate, express themselves, negotiate perspectives, and build connections. Together, they support the growth of democratic sensibility and ensure that daily classroom life becomes an experience of democracy-in-action.



## 5. DEMOCRATIC SENSIBILITY

Democratic sensibility is a central concept in Aesthetic and Embodied Learning for Democracy (AELD). It refers to the child's emerging, embodied awareness of self, others, and the shared world, and their capacity to relate with fairness, care, curiosity, and responsibility. It grows through everyday experiences of participating with others — through movement, emotion, imagination, gesture, silence, and dialogue.

Democratic sensibility is not a skill or a behaviour to be taught. It is a relational and affective orientation that develops over time as children come to understand how their actions matter, how others respond, and how a group is shaped through shared activity. It becomes visible when children:

- notice fairness or unfairness
- express care or curiosity toward others
- include or make space for a peer
- take a perspective or adjust their own pace
- attune to the emotional atmosphere of the group
- risk contributing an idea or expressing a feeling
- repair misunderstandings
- experience belonging

AELD supports children in developing this sensibility by creating conditions in which they can coexist, imagine, negotiate, and collaborate in ways that honour democratic values and principles.

## HOW DEMOCRATIC SENSIBILITY EMERGES

Democratic sensibility emerges through:

- the body: movement, posture, proximity, gesture, rhythm
- emotions: excitement, hesitation, frustration, empathy
- imagination: symbolic play, dramatic expression, storytelling
- relationships: noticing others, being noticed, giving and receiving care
- meaning-making: interpreting events together, co-creating narratives

Children's early encounters with democracy are felt, not formal. They are lived in moments of turn-taking, shared rhythm, conflict repair, imaginative collaboration, and gentle negotiation.

These experiences shape how children understand:

- "I belong here".
- "I can influence what happens".
- "Others matter".
- "We can do something together".

This embodied, relational knowing is the foundation for later democratic life.

## CONDITIONS THAT SUPPORT DEMOCRATIC SENSIBILITY

Democratic sensibility develops when children are in environments where they can:

- feel emotionally safe — safety allows children to take risks, express feelings, and step into participation
- participate through multiple expressive languages — gesture, drawing, modelling, movement, sound, storytelling, all of which allow children to contribute
- experience time and pace that respect their rhythms — slower, more spacious rhythms allow meaning and relationship to unfold
- encounter responsive educators for democracy — responsiveness models democratic attention and care
- engage in shared activities that require cooperation — building, imagining, exploring, and creating together, nurture sensitivity to others

These conditions are not separate from the curriculum; they shape the texture of learning and participation.

## RECOGNISING DEMOCRATIC SENSIBILITY IN PRACTICE

Democratic sensibility appears subtly and continuously in children's interactions. Educators for democracy may notice it through:

- a child pausing to let another speak
- a child adjusting play to include a hesitant peer
- two children falling into rhythm when drawing or moving
- a child offering comfort or recognising a peer's emotion
- a group negotiating the meaning of a story or collective work
- children collectively repairing a conflict
- shared silence that holds emotional weight

These moments are small but profound. They show how children sense and respond to the ethical, relational, and imaginative dimensions of learning together.

AECED Case 14/15: Portugal - Early Years and Primary Education.

Practice example illustrating how democratic sensibility emerges through children's embodied, relational, and imaginative interactions in everyday classroom life.

**During a movement activity, a child slows down to match the pace of a peer who is uncertain. The educator observes the shift and quietly says, "You noticed your friend's rhythm." The child smiles, and the hesitant peer joins in more confidently. This small embodied adjustment reveals democratic sensibility: responsiveness, care, and relational awareness.**

## AGE-RELATED EXPRESSIONS OF DEMOCRATIC SENSIBILITY (3-10)

The examples below are indicative, not a checklist.

### **Ages 3-5**

Children may show democratic sensibility when they:

- mimic or echo others' gestures to connect
- notice that materials belong to everyone, not just themselves
- show early empathy ("they're sad")
- join group rhythms or collective movement
- express discomfort when someone is excluded

## **Ages 6–7**

Children may:

- negotiate roles or sequences in play
- combine verbal and non-verbal communication to solve problems
- notice fairness (“It’s not fair if only one decides”)
- show growing capacity for perspective-taking

## **Ages 8–10**

Children may:

- articulate reasons for their choices
- recognise group dynamics and emotional states
- propose group agreements
- take initiative in conflict repair
- build shared narratives or projects with attention to others’ ideas

These examples help educators for democracy identify democratic sensibility in everyday moments.

## **WHY DEMOCRATIC SENSIBILITY MATTERS**

Democratic sensibility prepares children for democratic life by developing:

- empathy and relational awareness
- embodied understanding of fairness and responsibility
- confidence to contribute and negotiate
- ability to sense and respond to others
- capacity for shared imagination and problem-solving

These capacities are essential for democratic participation — not only later in life, but now, in the ongoing life of the classroom.

AELD nurtures these capacities through relational, aesthetic, and embodied experiences, making democracy something children live rather than simply learn about.



These are examples of activities carried out by kindergarten children as part of case studies conducted by the Portuguese team in 2024.

## 6. RESPONSIVE PEDAGOGIES

Responsive pedagogy is the educator's capacity to notice, interpret, and respond to children's actions, emotions, rhythms, and emerging meanings in ways that honour democratic values. It is central to AELD because it models the relational attentiveness, flexibility, and care required for democratic life.

Responsiveness does not mean doing whatever children want; nor does it imply a lack of structure. Rather, it refers to the quality of the educator's engagement—how they tune in, adapt, and co-create learning experiences with children.

Through responsiveness, children learn that:

- their feelings and contributions matter
- others' needs also matter
- shared activities evolve through mutual influence
- meaning is shaped collectively
- participation requires attention and care

Responsive pedagogy transforms everyday interactions into opportunities for cultivating democratic sensibility.

## WHAT DOES RESPONSIVE PEDAGOGY MEAN IN AELD?

In AELD, responsive pedagogy involves:

- **attuning to children's cues** — noticing gestures, silences, hesitations, excitement, rhythms, and imaginative shifts
- **adjusting in the moment** — changing pace, materials, grouping, or direction based on children's emerging intentions
- **holding uncertainty gently** — allowing space for exploration and not rushing to predetermined outcomes
- **supporting emotional expression** — acknowledging feelings as meaningful contributions to the shared process
- **valuing multimodal contributions** — recognising that ideas can be expressed through movement, drawing, sound, material play, or posture — not only words
- **encouraging co-agency** — inviting children to shape the activity together

This responsiveness creates the relational conditions in which democratic learning becomes possible.

## TEACHER AS CO-LEARNER AND EMBODIED PARTICIPANT

Responsive pedagogy positions the educator not only as an observer but also as a co-learner who participates in the group's unfolding meaning-making. This involves turning attention toward one's own bodily responses — hesitation, excitement, tension, curiosity — and recognising them as pedagogical information. When educators notice their own embodied reactions with openness, they can adjust their presence and actions to support the group's rhythms and needs. This stance models democratic participation by showing that adults, too, are learners who listen, adapt, and co-construct the experience with children.

This strengthens the democratic and relational dimension of responsiveness while making the teacher's embodied role explicit.

## WHY RESPONSIVE PEDAGOGY MATTERS FOR DEMOCRACY

Responsiveness enacts democratic values:

- Freedom: children contribute in ways that feel authentic to them
- Equality and Equity: diverse communicative modes are recognised and included
- Responsiveness (as a value): children learn to listen, adjust, and care for others

It also supports democratic principles:

- Power-sharing: educators for democracy and children influence each other
- Transforming dialogue: meaning evolves through interaction
- Holistic learning: cognition, emotion, body, and imagination are linked
- Relational well-being: attunement deepens trust

Through responsive pedagogy, children experience democracy as something lived in relationship, not only spoken about.



## EDUCATOR ACTIONS THAT SUPPORT RESPONSIVENESS

Educators for democracy cultivate responsiveness through:

- pausing — allowing a moment to see what emerges, rather than rushing to correct or direct
- mirroring and amplifying — reflecting a child’s gesture, sound, or idea so it becomes available to others
- asking open questions
  - “What do you think might happen next?”
  - “I noticed you slowed down — why?”
  - “How can we include your friend’s idea?”
- adjusting pace and rhythm — recognising when slowing down invites deeper participation
- noticing relational cues — seeing who is hesitant, who is leading, who needs support
- allowing materials to speak — letting children explore the possibilities of objects before offering explanations

These moves help children sense that their contributions shape the collective.

### AECED Case 2: Croatia - Early Years

Practice example illustrating how democratic sensibility emerges through children’s embodied, relational, and imaginative interactions in everyday classroom life.

**During a storytelling activity, a child repeatedly taps a small drum, softly at first and then more confidently. Instead of redirecting the child to “listen,” the educator notices the rhythm and says, “It sounds like your drum has something to tell the story.” The children incorporate the rhythm as the heartbeat of a character. The educator’s responsive move transforms the moment: the child’s gesture becomes a shared narrative thread, and the group’s story shifts.**

## CONDITIONS THAT ENABLE RESPONSIVE PEDAGOGY

Responsive pedagogy requires a supportive environment for both children and educators for democracy.

These conditions include:

- A sense of emotional safety — Children feel safe contributing ideas; educators for democracy confidently adjust their plans in response.
- Sufficient time and spacious pacing — Meaning and relationships unfold slowly; responsiveness cannot be rushed.
- Familiar routines that allow variation — Consistency gives children security; flexibility allows responsiveness.
- Opportunities for multimodal expression — Materials, movement, drawing, sound, and dramatic play invite diverse contributions.
- Shared responsibility among educators for democracy — Professional dialogue helps educators interpret children's cues collectively.

These conditions reflect findings across the AECED project and national dialogues: responsiveness thrives where educators for democracy feel safe, supported, and able to adapt.

## HOW RESPONSIVE PEDAGOGY NURTURES DEMOCRATIC SENSIBILITY

Responsive pedagogy strengthens democratic sensibility by helping children:

- feel seen and valued
- recognise the effects of their actions
- adjust to others' needs
- co-create shared meaning
- engage emotionally and imaginatively
- participate in group decisions
- develop confidence and relational responsibility

In this way, responsiveness becomes a democratic practice — a way of living together ethically and attentively.

## 7. ACCEPTIVE GAZE

The acceptive gaze is a foundational stance in Aesthetic and Embodied Learning for Democracy (AELD). It describes a way of seeing children — and being with children — that is grounded in openness, curiosity, and respect. Rather than evaluating or categorising children’s actions, the acceptive gaze invites educators to participate in democracy by receiving what children express, taking their contributions seriously, and allowing meaning to emerge through mutual attention.

The acceptive gaze is democratic because it affirms the inherent dignity and agency of every child. It creates a relational climate where children feel seen, recognised, and trusted. When educators for democracy meet children with an acceptive gaze, they communicate:

- “Your presence matters”.
- “Your contribution is meaningful”.
- “You belong here”.
- “We can make sense of this together”.

This stance opens space for democratic sensibility to grow.



## WHAT IS THE ACCEPTIVE GAZE?

The acceptive gaze involves:

- openness — welcoming children’s expressions — verbal, non-verbal, emotional, gestural — without predetermined expectations
- curiosity — wondering about children’s meanings, intentions, feelings, and rhythms
- non-judgement / Suspending judgement (“good,” “wrong,” “not appropriate”) that narrow children’s possibilities
- relational presence — offering attention that is warm, non-intrusive, and responsive
- slowness and patience — giving children time to express themselves and trusting that meaning may unfold gradually

The acceptive gaze is not passive; it is an active ethical engagement. It recognises the value of each child’s lived experience and supports the co-construction of meaning.

## THE ACCEPTIVE GAZE TOWARD ONESELF AND ITS ROLE IN CO-LEARNING

The acceptive gaze is not directed only outward toward children; it also turns inward. Educators practise accepting their own bodily responses — moments of uncertainty, emotional shifts, or intuitive reactions — as meaningful parts of the learning encounter. By meeting themselves with an acceptive gaze, educators strengthen their capacity to remain open, curious, and grounded. This self-directed acceptance supports a co-learning stance, allowing educators to analyse their responses without judgement and adjust their participation accordingly. When children witness adults attending gently to their own expressions, they learn that the acceptive gaze can also be applied to themselves and their peers, becoming a shared ethic of relating.

## WHY THE ACCEPTIVE GAZE MATTERS FOR DEMOCRACY

Democracy depends on the ability to see and be seen, to recognise others as fully human, and to engage with their perspectives, emotions, and needs. The acceptive gaze cultivates this at the earliest stages of life.

Through the acceptive gaze, children learn:

- that their voices and gestures have value
- that difference is welcomed
- that others' perspectives matter
- that recognition is relational, not conditional
- that they can participate without fear of judgement
- that democracy involves presence, listening, and empathy

In AELD, the acceptive gaze creates the emotional and relational foundation on which democratic sensibility grows.



## HOW EDUCATORS FOR DEMOCRACY PRACTISE THE ACCEPTIVE GAZE

Educators for democracy embody the acceptive gaze through:

- attentive stillness — pausing before responding, allowing the child’s expression to land
- gentle eye contact or softened gaze — not intrusive or demanding, but open and receptive
- naming what is observed without evaluation
  - “I see your hands moving quickly”.
  - “It looks like you’re thinking about something”.
  - “I notice you’re staying close to your friend”.
- validating children’s ways of expressing meaning — accepting gesture, movement, silence, drawing, or sound as legitimate contributions
- making space for hesitation — understanding hesitation as meaningful, not as resistance or disinterest
- mirroring without taking over — echoing a child’s action or tone to signal recognition

These practices help children feel safe, valued, and connected.

AECED Case 14/15: Portugal - Early Years and Primary Education.

Practice example illustrating how democratic sensibility emerges through children’s embodied, relational, and imaginative interactions in everyday classroom life.

**During a clay activity, a child presses their fingers repeatedly into the clay without forming a recognisable shape. Instead of suggesting “make something,” the educator kneels beside the child and softly mirrors the rhythm with their own fingers on the table. The child looks up, smiles, and continues. Another child joins the rhythm. The educator quietly says, “Your rhythm brought us together.”**

This moment shows how the acceptive gaze:

- recognises the child’s expression as meaningful
- invites connection
- supports shared agency
- nurtures democratic sensibility through relational attention

## CONDITIONS THAT SUPPORT THE ACCEPTIVE GAZE

The acceptive gaze flourishes when the environment supports:

- Emotional safety — children and educators for democracy feel comfortable expressing feelings without judgement.
- Reduced pressure to perform — learning is not tied to immediate outcomes or correctness.
- Slower rhythms and flexible pacing — time is given for meaning to emerge.
- Trust and relational warmth — educators for democracy feel supported in their own vulnerability.
- Multimodal participation — children can contribute through movement, sound, materials, gesture, and silence.

These conditions reflect findings from sessions in which the prototype materials were tested and from national dialogues with educators and policy actors.

## HOW THE ACCEPTIVE GAZE SUPPORTS DEMOCRATIC SENSIBILITY

When educators for democracy practise the acceptive gaze, children learn to:

- attend to and respect others
- recognise their own impact
- experience themselves as valued members of a group
- express emotions with confidence
- negotiate meaning collaboratively
- sense the ethical qualities of a relationship

The acceptive gaze is thus a democratic gesture: a relational way of seeing and being seen that provides the ground for participation, empathy, dialogue, and coexistence.



## WHAT IS AN AELD ENVIRONMENT?

An AELD environment is one that:

- Welcomes multiple expressive languages — spaces, materials, and routines enable children to communicate through gesture, movement, sound, drawing, modelling, storytelling, and silence.
- Supports relational well-being — the arrangement of space fosters connection, safety, and opportunities for children to see and be seen.
- Encourages exploration and co-agency — children can influence how materials are used, how activities unfold, and how shared projects take shape.
- Offers sensory and aesthetic richness — textures, colours, sounds, and materials invite curiosity and meaning-making.
- Allows flexibility in pacing and direction — time and space accommodate emerging ideas and children's rhythms.
- Reduces pressure to perform 'correctly' — children feel free to express themselves without fear of being evaluated for correctness.

Designing an AELD environment means creating conditions where democratic sensibility can take root through daily experiences of belonging, participation, and co-creation.



## ENVIRONMENTAL QUALITIES THAT SUPPORT AELD

AELD environments include qualities rather than fixed prescriptions. These conditions reflect findings from sessions in which the prototype materials were tested and from national dialogues with educators and policy actors.

**A. Participation and agency** — Children should be able to choose how to enter activities, shape materials, and influence shared processes.

**B. Multimodality and material invitations** — Materials offer multiple entry points: stacking, bending, rolling, tracing, balancing, transforming, and animating. They welcome different ways of contributing. This supports equity and inclusion: children with diverse communication styles find meaningful ways to participate.

**C. Relational well-being** — The way the room is set up shapes how children relate to one another. Small-group tables or floor areas, clear but flexible zones (e.g., rugs, low shelves), and spaces where everyone can see each other support connection and a sense of belonging. Cosy corners for two or three children and clear pathways for moving around the room help children stay regulated and adjust to one another's presence.

**D. Imagination and perspective-taking** — Objects, images, shadows, light, sound, and natural materials invite children to see the world from different angles and create shared stories or projects.

**E. Temporal flexibility** — Democracy requires time. Slow pedagogy, open-ended invitations, and revisiting work allow children to deepen their exploration and relational attunement to one another.

**F. Acceptive atmosphere** — The emotional climate signals that all contributions are welcome. This includes how materials are introduced, how tension is handled, and how educators for democracy model curiosity rather than judgement.

## DESIGNING LEARNING SPACES TO SUPPORT PARTICIPATION

Learning spaces can actively support democratic participation when:

- **materials are accessible** — children can reach, select, combine, and return objects independently
- **there are shared surfaces** — large tables, floor space, or outdoor areas — that support collaborative meaning-making
- **boundaries are soft** — children can move in and out of activities without disruption or penalty
- **there are places for stillness** — nooks, cushions, or quiet corners that allow children to step back and observe before joining
- **the environment is adjustable** — furniture, materials, and configurations can shift responsively to children's intentions
- **visual noise is minimised** — a calm space makes subtle gestures and emotional nuances easier to perceive

These design choices help children feel the classroom is a space they can shape — not only inhabit.

### AGE-SENSITIVE DESIGN (3–10 YEARS)

The basic principles stay constant, but environments adapt to developmental needs:

#### **Ages 3–5**

- soft boundaries, sensory-rich materials
- large movement spaces
- areas for parallel play and gradual joining
- props for imaginative transformation

#### **Ages 6–7**

- mixed materials for building and storytelling
- shared surfaces for collaborative work
- spaces that allow both group and individual exploration

#### **Ages 8–10**

- zones for extended project work
- materials that support perspective-taking and negotiation
- surfaces for shared planning, mapping, or documenting ideas

## EDUCATOR POSITIONING IN AELD ENVIRONMENTS

Environments also shape where educators for democracy place themselves and how they engage.

Responsive environmental positioning includes:

- sitting or kneeling at children's level
- moving slowly to reduce disruption
- observing before intervening
- using proximity to support safety without controlling
- allowing children to approach the educator when ready
- positioning oneself to include hesitant children subtly

These choices model democratic attention and care.

**A group of children begins arranging loose materials on the floor. One child hesitates at the edge. Because materials are spread widely with open pathways, the child can join gradually. The educator gently mirrors the child's pace, offering a piece without pressure. Soon the child contributes a new pattern that the group incorporates. The environment supported agency, inclusion, and relational awareness — key aspects of democratic sensibility.**

AECED Case 1: Croatia - Early Years and Primary Education.

Practice example illustrating how democratic sensibility emerges through children's embodied, relational, and imaginative interactions in everyday classroom life.

## DESIGNING FOR EDUCATOR SAFETY AND RESPONSIVENESS

AELD environments support educators and children in promoting democracy. According to AECED, "case trials", educators for democracy enact responsiveness and the acceptive gaze more confidently when:

- spaces reduce behavioural stress
- pacing is allowed to slow
- collaboration with another adult is possible
- environmental routines support transitions
- materials invite exploratory rather than competitive use

Creating an environment that reduces pressure helps educators for democracy take relational risks and model democratic openness.

## 9. EVERYDAY PRACTICES THAT ENACT DEMOCRACY

Everyday practices are the micro-moments and recurring routines in which children experience democracy as something lived. These practices do not require special projects or elaborate interventions. They emerge through movement, rhythm, gesture, imagination, dialogue, and collaboration.

AELD helps educators for democracy notice these moments, name their democratic potential, and nurture the conditions for democratic sensibility to grow. Everyday practices are where democratic values and principles become visible, felt, and shared.

The following categories reflect practices observed across field sites and consolidated in the AECED project.



## SHARED MEANING-MAKING

Children create meaning together through play, conversation, drawing, movement, and material exploration. Shared meaning-making nurtures democratic life because it requires listening, negotiating, adapting, and recognising multiple perspectives.

What it looks like:

- children co-construct stories or representations
- meaning evolves as children respond to each other's ideas
- materials are used to negotiate emerging interpretations
- educators for democracy support the process without determining the outcome

## EMOTIONAL AND RELATIONAL AWARENESS

Democratic sensibility grows when children can sense their own emotions, recognise the feelings of others, and participate in a group climate where emotions are welcomed rather than corrected.

What it looks like:

- children name or show emotions in multimodal ways
- educators for democracy validate feelings and help integrate them into the group process
- emotional tones (excitement, tension, hesitation) shape shared understanding
- conflicts are approached as opportunities for repair and learning

**A child becomes frustrated during building play and pushes materials aside. Instead of stopping the activity, the educator kneels down and quietly says, "I can see something felt difficult." Another child adds, "Let's try together." The group slows down, adjusts their rhythm, and continues. Emotional expression becomes part of the shared work rather than a disruption.**

AECED Case 2: Croatia- Primary Education.

Practice example illustrating how democratic sensibility emerges through children's embodied, relational, and imaginative interactions in everyday classroom life.

## MULTIMODAL PARTICIPATION

Children participate democratically through many expressive languages: gesture, movement, drawing, rhythm, sound, gaze, and silence. Recognising these modes is central to equity and inclusion.

What it looks like:

- children contribute ideas non-verbally
- educators for democracy interpret gestures, patterns, and rhythms as meaningful contributions
- materials invite diverse modes of participation
- activities allow for different tempos, intensities, and expressive forms

## AGENCY AND RESPONSIBILITY

Children experience agency when their actions matter, and responsibility when they consider the impact of their actions on others and on shared activities.

What it looks like:

- children organise materials, define roles, or propose changes
- small decisions (placement, pacing, grouping) influence the activity
- educators for democracy follow children's initiatives and support co-agency
- responsibility is felt rather than imposed

**In a role-play scenario, children decide to rotate who holds the “map” so everyone has a turn leading the group. The educator names the democratic action: “You shared leadership so everyone could help guide us.” Children experience leadership as something distributed rather than owned.**

AECED Case 2: Croatia - Primary Education.

Practice example illustrating how democratic sensibility emerges through children's embodied, relational, and imaginative interactions in everyday classroom life.



Figure illustrating multiple expressive modes through which children can participate in democratic learning, including drawing, gesture, silence, sound, rhythm, movement, observing, and storytelling. Children can participate in many ways, including drawing, gesture, silence, sound, rhythm, observation, movement, and storytelling.

## IMAGINATION AND PERSPECTIVE-TAKING

Imagination allows children to enter into symbolic worlds, explore different viewpoints, and create alternative possibilities. This nurtures empathy and flexible thinking — key democratic dispositions.

What it looks like:

- children imagine objects, roles, or situations from new angles
- dramatic, narrative, or visual play opens possibilities for multiple perspectives
- educators for democracy scaffold perspective-taking through gentle questions

**While reading a picture book, a child says, “Maybe the tree is sad because no one sits under it.” The educator responds, “What might help it feel better?” The children imagine solutions collaboratively. Perspective-taking emerges through imaginative engagement.**

AECED Case 14/15: Portugal - Early Years and Primary Education.

Practice example illustrating how democratic sensibility emerges through children’s embodied, relational, and imaginative interactions in everyday classroom life.

## TIME, RHYTHM, AND RETURN

Democratic participation requires time — time to sense, observe, imagine, negotiate, and repair. When educators for democracy slow the pace, children can enter a shared rhythm that supports deeper involvement.

What it looks like:

- revisiting work over days or weeks
- slowing transitions to support relational synchronisation
- allowing pauses for reflection or emotional integration

**Children start a shared sculpture but pause when unsure how to continue. The educator suggests returning tomorrow. Upon revisiting, the children find new ideas and rhythms. The slow return allows democratic meaning-making to unfold gradually.**

AECED Case 2: Croatia - Primary Education.

Practice example illustrating how democratic sensibility emerges through children’s embodied, relational, and imaginative interactions in everyday classroom life.

## ACCEPTIVE GAZE PRACTICES

The acceptive gaze becomes visible in everyday routines and interactions. It forms the emotional foundation for democratic participation.

What it looks like:

- welcoming gestures, expressions, and silences
- educators for democracy name children's contributions without judgement
- children mirroring each other with interest

**A child quietly watches peers from a distance. The educator moves slightly closer and says gently, "You're noticing everything." The child slowly joins. Recognition, not pressure, invites participation.**

AECED Case 14/15: Portugal - Early Years and Primary Education.

Practice example for illustrating how democratic sensibility emerges through children's embodied, relational, and imaginative interactions in everyday classroom life.

Everyday practices are where democracy takes root in children's experience. Through shared meaning-making, emotional attunement, multimodal participation, agency, imagination, pacing, and the acceptive gaze, children come to understand themselves as contributors to a shared world. These practices form the lived ground of democratic sensibility.

Over time, children can learn to offer the acceptive gaze to one another — welcoming differences, noticing peers' emotions and rhythms, and taking shared responsibility for co-creating a safe learning climate.





## 10. EDUCATOR REFLECTION PROMPTS

AELD recognises that educators' reflective engagement for democracy is just as important as children's participation. Educators for democracy shape the relational and emotional climate of the classroom, interpret children's expressions, and make pedagogical decisions that influence how democracy is lived in everyday interactions.

This section supports educators for democracy in noticing, interpreting, and deepening their practice through reflection — individually and collectively — while sustaining the emotional and relational foundations required for democratic work.

Professional learning in AELD is not a technical process; it is a relational, embodied, and reflective journey grounded in care, curiosity, and shared inquiry.

## WHY EDUCATOR REFLECTION MATTERS FOR DEMOCRACY

Educators for democracy who practise reflection demonstrate:

- humility
- openness
- responsibility
- empathy
- willingness to adjust
- ability to see multiple perspectives

These are essential democratic dispositions — children learn them by seeing them lived.

Reflection helps educators for democracy cultivate learning environments where democratic sensibility can emerge naturally, gently, and authentically.

## REFLECTION AS A DEMOCRATIC PRACTICE

Reflection allows educators for democracy to recognise how:

- their responses influence children's agency and belonging
- emotional and relational dynamics shape learning
- democratic sensibility emerges through small gestures
- their own assumptions, feelings, and habits affect the group
- classroom conditions support or constrain inclusion

Reflection is democratic because it involves attending to complexity, listening to multiple perspectives (including children's), and approaching uncertainty with openness.

Educators for democracy model democratic sensibility by reflecting, not evaluating themselves, but to understand, grow, and respond with care.

## CORE REFLECTIVE ORIENTATIONS IN AELD

These orientations support educators for democracy in recognising democratic potential in daily practice.

- Curiosity rather than certainty: asking “What might this gesture mean?”, rather than “What is the correct interpretation?”
- Attunement to emotion: recognising feelings — children’s and one’s own — as meaningful information.
- Attention to relational patterns: noticing who joins, who hesitates, who leads, and who withdraws.
- Awareness of pacing: observing when slowing down opens space for participation.
- Holding hesitation gently: understanding hesitation as a democratic signal, not a failure.
- Recognition of one’s influence: realising that the educator's presence, voice, and movement shape the learning ecology.

These orientations cultivate the reflective capacity essential for responsive pedagogy.

# REFLECTION TOOLS

## **A. Reflection on values and principles**

- How did I support freedom, equity, and responsiveness today?
- When did children show power-sharing or co-agency?
- How did transforming dialogue emerge?

## **B. Reflection on democratic sensibility**

- When did a child show care, fairness, or sensitivity to others?
- What small gestures signaled belonging or exclusion?
- How did emotions shape the group's participation?

## **C. Reflection on responsive pedagogy**

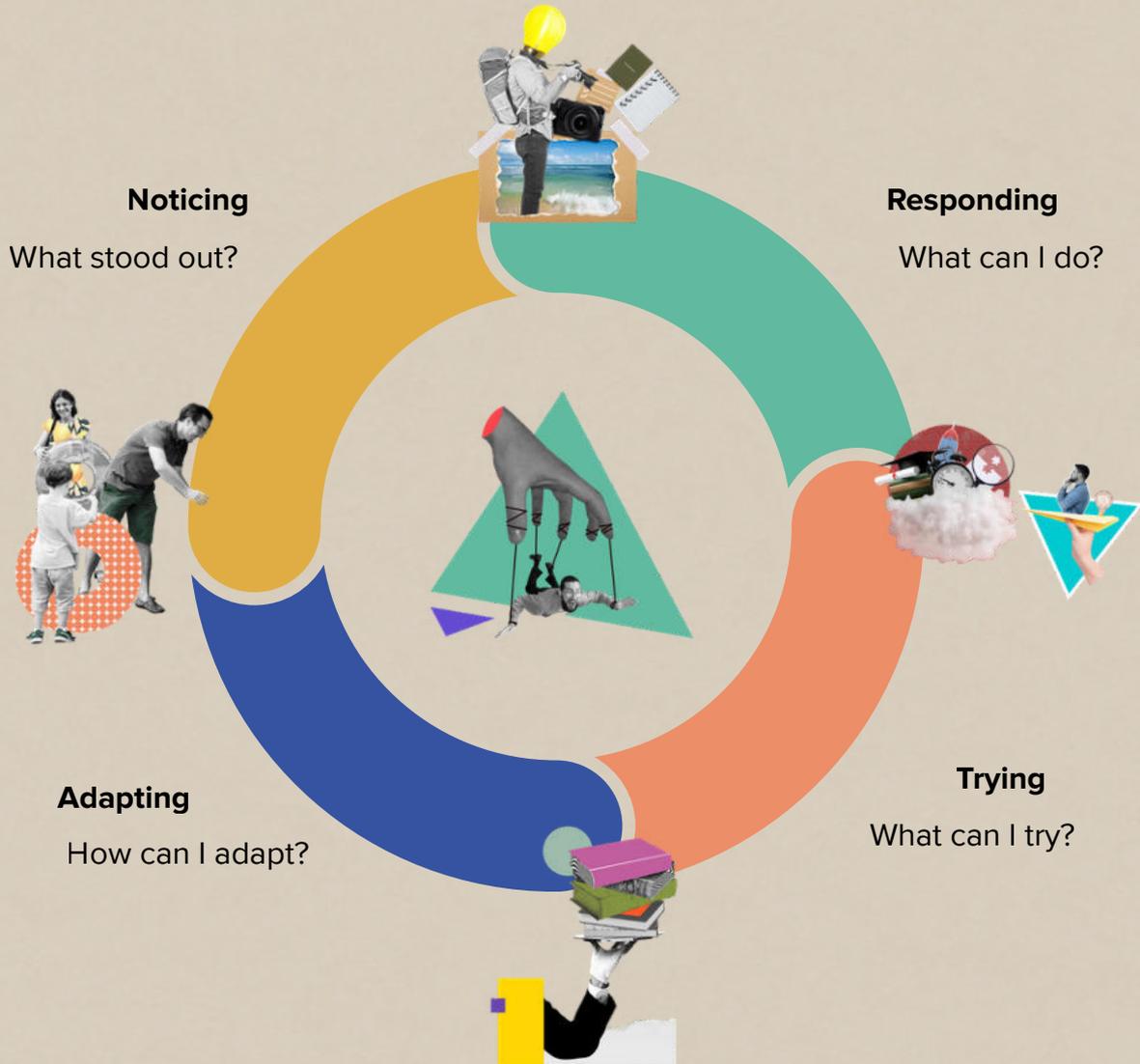
- What child cues did I notice today?
- How did I adjust pace, materials, or positioning in response?
- When did I choose to pause, wait, or interpret differently?

## **D. Reflection on the acceptive gaze**

- When did I practise acceptance rather than evaluation?
- How did I welcome non-verbal contributions?
- How did children respond when I offered recognition?

These prompts help educators for democracy become more aware of the democratic potential already present in their everyday choices.

## EDUCATOR REFLECTION CYCLE



Noticing → Responding → Trying → Adapting

Simple reflection cycle supporting educators' awareness of democratic practice. The cycle prompts noticing, responding, trying new approaches, and adapting practice based on children's responses.

## EDUCATOR PROFESSIONAL LEARNING AS COLLECTIVE INQUIRY

AELD thrives when professional learning is shared. Educators for democracy in the AECED case trials repeatedly emphasised that democratic practice requires emotional and relational support.

Collective inquiry allows educators for democracy to:

- share uncertainty and vulnerability without judgement
- interpret children's expressions together
- recognise patterns across classrooms
- cultivate shared language around AELD
- feel supported in experimenting with democratic practices
- normalise risk-taking and pedagogical innovation

AECED Case 14/15: Portugal - Early Years and Primary Education.

Practice example illustrating how democratic sensibility emerges through children's embodied, relational, and imaginative interactions in everyday classroom life.

**Two educators for democracy review a short video clip of children arranging materials. One notices a child's subtle hesitation; the other observes a rhythmic pattern between two children. They discuss how they might respond next time. Through dialogue, they broaden each other's perception and deepen understanding.**

## CONDITIONS FOR EDUCATOR SAFETY AND PROFESSIONAL GROWTH

Across field sites and national dialogues, educators for democracy emphasised the need for safety, time, and trust to engage with democratic pedagogy.

Professional learning is supported when:

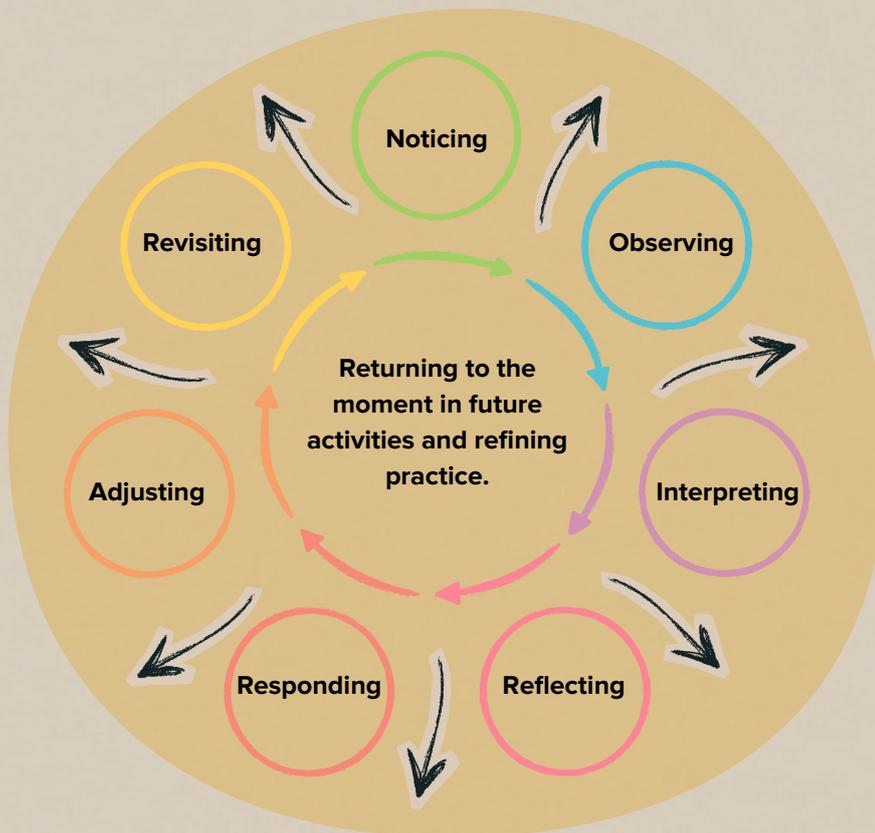
- Educators for democracy feel emotionally safe — they can express doubts, wonderings, or discomfort without fear of judgement.
- Time is protected for reflection — short, regular reflective pauses are more effective than occasional long sessions.
- Leaders value democratic practice — supportive leadership legitimises experimentation and gentle adjustments to routines.

- Collaborative culture is encouraged — reflecting together helps educators see beyond their individual perspectives and promotes democracy.
- Experimentation is normalised — trying, revisiting, and refining practices are key to AELD.

These conditions create the democratic soil in which educators for democracy can grow alongside children.

## PROFESSIONAL LEARNING CYCLES

Educators for democracy deepen their practice through short, repeatable cycles of:



Noticing → Observing → Interpreting → Responding → Reflecting → Adjusting → Revisiting.

Cycle diagram representing professional learning in AELD. It shows how educators for democracy engage in ongoing cycles of noticing, interpreting, responding, reflecting, adjusting, and revisiting practice, mirroring democratic processes of attention, dialogue, and continuous learning.

## **11. CONCLUSION: EARLY DEMOCRATIC LIFE AS AESTHETIC AND EMBODIED PRACTICE**

AELD invites educators for democracy to see everyday classroom life as a space where democracy can be lived, felt, and practised from the very beginning of a child's educational journey. Democracy does not emerge only through formal rules or abstract ideas; it grows through the small, relational, and embodied encounters that shape how children connect with each other and with the world.

Throughout this Guide, we have explored how democratic values, principles, democratic sensibility, responsive pedagogy, and the acceptive gaze take form in early years and primary settings. We have shown how simple routines, material explorations, shared stories, collective rhythms, and moments of hesitation or repair offer children opportunities to experience belonging, fairness, responsibility, and care.

AELD is not an additional curriculum or a set of activities to deliver. It is a way of seeing, being with, and responding to children that honours their agency and supports their participation in a shared world. It is grounded in attentiveness, relational warmth, and the belief that each gesture or contribution — no matter how small — can shift how the group learns and lives together.

For educators, practising AELD means entering a reflective and relational stance. It asks for curiosity, patience, sensitivity, and the courage to listen deeply. It invites educators for democracy to slow down, notice children's expressions, follow emerging ideas, and co-create meaning with the group. This work can feel vulnerable at times, yet it is precisely this openness that creates the conditions for democratic learning to flourish.

By nurturing democratic sensibility through aesthetic and embodied experience, educators for democracy help children develop the foundations of democratic life: empathy, perspective-taking, shared responsibility, and the capacity to imagine and build worlds together.

The practices described in this Guide do not aim for perfection. They aim for presence — and for a way of attending to children that recognises the democratic potential of everyday moments. With each gesture, story, pause, rhythm, disagreement, or creative collaboration, children learn what it means to participate in a community that values their voice and their way of being.

AELD offers educators for democracy a path to cultivate these experiences with intention and care. As children explore, create, feel, and relate, they begin to form the democratic dispositions that will accompany them throughout life. Through this work, democracy becomes not just a future ideal, but something lived now, in the shared life of the classroom.



