



AECED

aesthetic and embodied
learning for democracy

AECED PROJECT REPORT

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Project report, including accounts from guide champions and early adopters, with content also shared on the project website and blogs, by lead partner

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Coordinator	University of Lapland
PI	Professor Susan Meriläinen
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Authors	Jo Barber, Suzanne Culshaw, Claire Dickerson, Karen Mpamhanga, Philippa Mulberry, Marie Toseland, Philip Woods
Document Manager	Philip Woods
Internal review	Pilvikki Lantela and Susan Meriläinen

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ABSTRACT

Research highlights that our bodies and feelings play a crucial role in learning. This is of enormous relevance to education for democracy at a time when democracy faces many challenges. The AECED project (2023-2026), carried out by a consortium of six universities in Croatia, Finland, Germany, Latvia, Portugal and UK, has undertaken groundbreaking research for the purpose of enhancing and enriching education for democracy through a focus on aesthetic and embodied learning. The results of the research are new insights into the experience and outcomes of aesthetic and embodied learning for democracy (AELD). The fruits of the research are reflected in a set of resources made available by the project: an innovative Pedagogical Framework and accompanying Guides and Practice Companions for all phases of education: early years and primary, secondary, higher education and adult, professional and organisational learning. These are already being used by ‘trailblazers’. We invite anyone concerned with education for democracy to put aesthetic and embodied learning for democracy (AELD) into action. You are welcome to explore the free-to-download resources, available from: <https://aeced.org/>

1. INTRODUCTION

This document is deliverable D2.7 of the AECED project. Its purpose is to provide an overview of the project for an external audience. Further information is available from the project website (aeced.org) and the project resources, featured in section 3, which can be accessed via the embedded links provided.

The AECED project is about education for democracy and, in particular, aesthetic and embodied learning for democracy – covering education from early years and primary to adult, professional and organisational learning.

The intended readership of the report includes all who are interested in education for democracy, whether concerned with cultivating democratic cultures, relationships and behaviours or exploring the value of arts-based and embodied learning for inclusion, participation and democratic practice. This includes educators, facilitators of adult, professional and organisational learning; and leaders, researchers, and policy-makers in educational and other institutions, as well as in community settings.

2. CONTEXT AND OVERALL OBJECTIVES

Most education for democracy gives too little attention to a fundamental dimension of learning – that is, the aesthetic and embodied nature of learning. The ambition of the AECED project has been to address and remedy this omission by undertaking research for the purpose of enhancing and enriching education for democracy through a focus on aesthetic and embodied learning.

Learning about democracy is relevant to everyone. The project’s focus is therefore all phases of education: early years and primary, secondary, higher education and adult, professional and organisational learning.

A concern that has impelled the project forward is the fact that democracy today faces many challenges. These include declining trust in institutions and leaders, social and political polarisation, the spread of disinformation, the persistence of social and economic inequalities and the existence of barriers to meaningful civic engagement - all factors intensified by global pressures. Education for democracy has long been recognised as a vital way to support and sustain democracy. It is especially important where democracy is under pressure, threatened or where its existence is fragile. The question at the forefront of the AECED research project has been how education for democracy can be experienced as a living process of learning that *connects* people with democracy.

What do we mean by connecting with democracy? We mean experiencing democracy not just through ideas, but as something that is sensed, embodied and felt. Connecting with democracy is not just about the head and what people think and learn cognitively. It is about enhancing awareness of the aesthetic and embodied aspects of democratic relations and the practice of democracy.

Research highlights that our bodies and feelings play a crucial role in learning, helping us understand how connections to democracy can be cultivated. Activities involving movement, bodily awareness, creative expression and reflection on aesthetic and bodily experiences are especially important. These activities are sometimes referred to as arts-based and embodied activities or methods of learning, or aesthetic and embodied pedagogical methods. They can



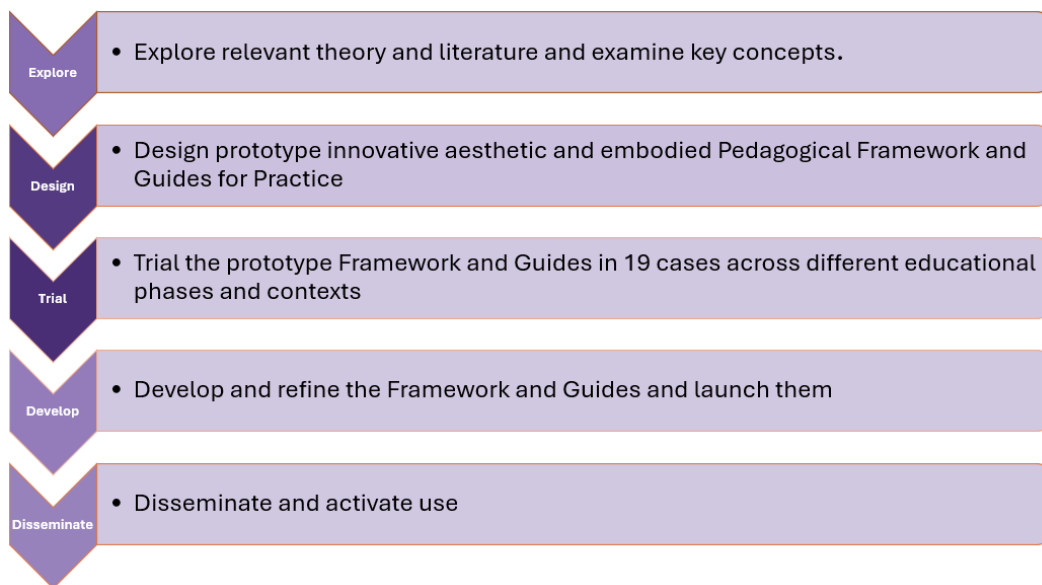
enable people to understand and experience democracy in new ways that are meaningful to them.

The need identified by the project was for the creation of an innovative pedagogical approach to learning for democracy. How to address this need grew from three things: an appreciation of the aesthetic and embodied dynamics of learning, a commitment to relating these to education for

democracy and a commitment to exploring what the resulting ideas can mean for practice.

The project had several aims. It wanted to ensure that it was informed by relevant theory and research literature, thus examining key concepts and ideas throughout the project that would illuminate aesthetic and embodied learning for democracy; it intended to design an innovative prototype Pedagogical Framework on aesthetic and embodied learning, a Framework that would lay the groundwork for innovative practice; it wanted to design research in multiple cases and in differing contexts that would trial the Framework and the kinds of practice it was created to support; finally, its aim was to learn from the research in order to revise and improve the Pedagogical Framework and make it freely available with supporting Guides to practice.

The steps of the project are shown here.



3. WORK PERFORMED AND MAIN ACHIEVEMENTS

Beginning in April 2023, the AECED is a three-year project carried out by a consortium of six universities in Croatia, Finland, Germany, Latvia, Portugal and UK.

The project first explored relevant literature, examined key concepts, and designed:

- a Prototype (draft) Pedagogical Framework for AELD,

To accompany the Framework, a Guide to Practice was drafted for each phase of education:

- Early Years and Primary Guide
- Secondary Education Guide
- Higher Education Guide
- Adult, Professional and Organisational Learning Guide

As well as conceptual clarification and exploration of key concepts and theories, the design process benefited from consultation on drafts with practitioners and policy actors, which informed the prototype Framework and Guides to be trialled in the project's research.

A methodology of participatory action research was adopted to trial the prototypes and to learn about educators' and learners' views and experience of aesthetic and embodied learning for democracy. Participants were active in the cases – for example, engaging with the ideas in the prototype Framework and Guides and designing or co-creating ways of undertaking aesthetic and embodied learning for democracy.

The core empirical phase of the project comprised 19 participatory action research cases, conducted in six different European countries: Croatia, Finland, Germany, Latvia, Portugal and UK. Between two and four cases were carried out in each of the six partner countries. Their primary purpose was to test, evaluate, and refine the prototype Pedagogical Framework and Guides. Findings were used to identify how the prototypes could be improved and made ready to launch for wide use in education.



Map image above created by Horizon Booster 2026.







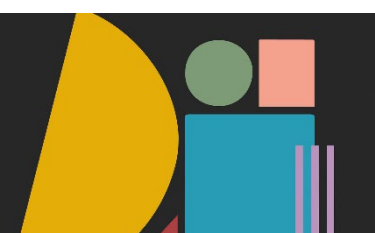
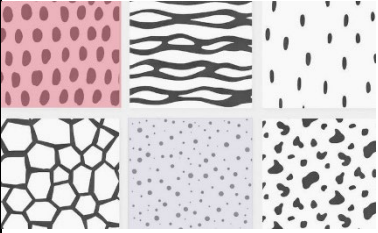

The research in the cases also gave insight into how aesthetic and embodied learning for democracy was experienced by participants and how it could better be understood. We explain more about what was found through the research in the next section.

We want the research to make a difference. We want it to be used to help in supporting people to connect with democracy. A key purpose of the project therefore is to make a difference to the practice of education for democracy in all phases of education. Informed by the insights gained through the research, the Pedagogical Framework and Guides that had been trialled were revised and improved. Also created, in addition to the original project plan, were 'Practice Companions', one to complement each Guide. This reinforced the importance attached to translating the ideas and lessons from the research into guidance that would be useful to practitioners and policy actors in all phases of education and across all subject areas.

The philosophy of the project is not to produce rigid blueprints and instructions for educators and learners to follow. It is to create resources that encourage educators and learners to be creative in how they apply and develop the guidance for their own practice and context.

The set of research-based resources created by the project have been created in English and translated into the languages of the home countries of the project's partner university teams and is available on the project website (<https://aeced.org/>).

The complete set is presented below and can be accessed via the project's 'Putting AELD into Action' page (<https://aeced.org/putting-aeld-into-action/>).

 <p style="text-align: center;">Pedagogical Framework</p> <p style="text-align: center;"><i>Connecting with Democracy: A Pedagogical Framework for Education for Democracy</i></p>		
Early Years and Primary Education		
 <p>Early Years and Primary Education Guide: Growing Democracy from the Start</p>	 <p>Early Years and Primary Education: Practice Companion</p>	
Secondary Education		
 <p>Connecting with Democracy in Secondary Education: A Guide to AELD</p>	 <p>Connecting with Democracy in Secondary Education: A Practice Companion</p>	
Higher Education		
 <p>Living Democracy in Higher Education: A Guide to AELD</p>	 <p>Practice Companion: Living Democracy in Higher Education</p>	
Adult, Professional and Organisational Learning		
 <p>Guide for AELD: In the Field of Adult, Professional and Organisational Learning</p>	 <p>Developing Democratic Engagements and Transformation in APOL: A Practice Companion</p>	

An integral part of the project’s work and obligation was to communicate about its work and disseminate its findings and the progress made in understanding aesthetic and embodied learning for democracy, as well as to encourage use of the final Framework, Guides and Practice Companions. The AECED website is therefore designed to be user-friendly so that information from the project is open for everyone to explore.

4. RESULTS BEYOND THE STATE OF THE ART

The project's contribution to the advancement of knowledge includes two areas of scientific endeavour. The two interconnect with each other and are mutually supportive.

The first is about conceptual thinking – that is, the ideas through which an area of study and practice such as aesthetic and embodied learning for democracy is understood. Large bodies of existing literature informed the project, including disciplines such as neuroscience and phenomenology and research exploring differing conceptions of democracy.

Thinking of democracy as *democracy-as-becoming* underpinned the project's approach. That is, democracy has been approached as something that unfolds in the everyday, in classrooms and educational institutions for instance and in how people discuss, listen, and relate to each other. Thus, democracy is not an abstract phenomenon or something that happens outside of the everyday realm, but something experienced at the personal level. A distinctive feature of the project was that it placed a conception of democracy-as-becoming at the heart of aesthetic and embodied learning for democracy.

The project developed concepts from the literature that promised to enhance understanding of aesthetic and embodied learning for democracy. For example, further work in refining and developing the concept of the *acceptive gaze* was undertaken collaboratively within the project. The *acceptive gaze*, in summary, is an attitude of perceiving oneself and others with openness and acceptance, avoiding immediate judgement, and recognising vulnerability and difference as resources for more democratic learning: it is a factor which we recognise as crucial to democracy and to aesthetic and embodied learning for democracy.

A further key concept explored and progressed in the project is that of *democratic sensibility*. It is a quality that can be cultivated. Democratic sensibility includes greater awareness of feelings and bodily senses and of connectedness with others in democratic relations and practice, as well as a felt connection with democratic values and principles. The concept helps to describe the distinct intent of aesthetic and embodied learning for democracy – which is not to focus solely or primarily on cognitive knowledge and skills, but to nurture senses, awareness, attributes and feelings vital for the flourishing of democracy.

The second area of scientific endeavour is the empirical research from which the project was able to gain insights into aesthetic and embodied learning for democracy, how it works and how it is experienced by participants. From the analysis of the research data in the 19 cases, it was possible to formulate, in a systematic way, features or characteristics that tended to be associated with aesthetic and embodied learning for democracy and the use of aesthetic and embodied pedagogical activities for this purpose.

These characteristics of aesthetic and embodied learning for democracy are set out below; they help in understanding the complex mix of factors that create the experience of such learning:

- provision of safe space
- awareness of tensions
- navigation of institutional barriers and constraints
- experiencing of disruption of linear time

- importance of engagement and curiosity
- blended roles between participants
- co-creation of activities
- experiencing of transformative moments
- ‘moving beyond’ (learning marked by uncertainty, liberatory pedagogy, transformation and reconfiguration of identity)

The research also enabled us to explore what kinds of experience and outcomes arise for participants when they engage with, and take part in, aesthetic and embodied learning for democracy. From our analysis of the project’s research data, we conclude that aesthetic and embodied learning for democracy can:

...cultivate qualities essential to democracy: cases found participants who fostered qualities such as greater empathy, curiosity, interpersonal adaptability and a sense of collective responsibility; as well as greater openness to ‘seeing’ the other

...increase awareness of aesthetic and embodied senses and their value in democratic agency and relations: cases found enhancement of embodied and sensory ways of knowing, which included drawing upon bodily awareness, learning to trust bodily intuition and learning to take notice of emotions and relational presence

...encourage more democratic ways of learning and creating knowledge – moving from rigid, hierarchical models of knowledge transmission towards more open-ended, dialogic and co-constructed ways of knowing

...reframe assumptions about how democracy can be known and understood: participants developed an enhanced appreciation of the value of moving beyond a purely cognitive engagement with democracy to exploring it aesthetically, bodily and relationally with others

...be experienced as a non-linear process of becoming in which participants are on a learning journey where possibilities are discovered that were not expected

...enhance democratic sensibility, through the interconnecting effects of these above processes

The writing up and exploration of ideas and findings continues. Topics being explored include responsive pedagogy; how aesthetic and embodied pedagogies can support learning for democracy; the relationship to the social process of commoning; movements in subjectivity arising from engagement with aesthetic and embodied learning for democracy in secondary education; cultivation of democratic sensibility; how democracy-as-becoming emerges within higher education; patterns of governance innovation towards democracy-as-becoming that become visible when democratic learning is enacted as embodied, situated practice; reimagining democracy not only as a system of government but as a lived experience shaped in classrooms, communities, and everyday encounters; interconnecting principles of democracy, democratic leadership and aesthetic and embodied methods in institutional settings; and transforming the collective social body into an intergenerational dialogue through aesthetic and embodied learning.

5. PRACTICAL IMPACT

We said earlier in this report that we want the research to make a difference; that we want the research and the resources we have published to be used to help in supporting people connect with democracy. Much of the project's dissemination therefore included opportunities for people to try out aesthetic and embodied learning activities for exploring democracy. Such opportunities were an integral part of dissemination activities. For example:

- a visualisation exercise was included in a joint conference presentation by the Finnish and UK partners;
- a drawing activity added a creative pause point between presentations by Finnish, Portuguese and UK partners within an online seminar;
- workshop activities led by the Latvian partner enabled participants to experience aesthetic and embodied learning for democracy through collage in one conference session and to experience democratic values through sound, movement, touch and emotion in another;
- and, led by the UK team, a series of different workshops included opportunities for students, educational leaders, higher education teachers and doctoral supervisors to engage in collage as a means of supporting reflection on democratic practices, and an outreach event (see box below) featured aesthetic and embodied learning for democracy tasters.

The UK partner contributed to a pop-up event in a local shopping centre as part of the UK-wide Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC)'s Festival of Social Science 2025¹. Visitors were invited to try out different aesthetic and embodied learning for democracy methods (collective collage, modelling, drawing, moving) to help them explore, feel, experience and reflect on democratic values, and how these values might impact on their everyday life at school, work, or home. Over 100 people visited the stand, including parents, grandparents, children and young people.

The project has also encouraged interest and sustained connections with practitioners and policy actors who are interested in promoting the Framework, Guides and Practice Companions ('guide champions') or using them in their practice ('trailblazers'). Outreach activities in support of this have been undertaken by partners across the consortium.

Guide Champions, all from higher education, echoed the value of the resources. One reported appreciation of how the Framework combined democratic theory with practical tools and saw strong relevance for students and professionals working with young people in educational, social and civic settings. They emphasised the Framework's contribution to building reflective, participatory and collaborative democratic practice across diverse learning environments.

The project's resources were only launched in March 2026. Nevertheless, there has been active interest in and use of them. At the time of writing, we are aware of 13 cases of use by trailblazers,

¹ <https://festivalofsocialscience.com/>

via feedback forms that the project has invited trailblazers or project partners to complete on their behalf.

Trailblazer users include individual teachers, a group of three academics, a head of department in an NGO (non-governmental organisation), a facilitator/trainer, a supervisor/counsellor and a university department. Across the project's six partner countries and all four phases of education (early years and primary, secondary, higher education, and adult, professional and organisational learning) trailblazers have made use of the AECED Framework, Guides, and Practice Companions in their everyday practice, in order to strengthen aesthetic and embodied learning for democracy and deepen reflective approaches.

These early trailblazers' practices ranged from classroom lessons to workshops offering new ways for learners to connect with ideas of democracy and to relate with one another. As they experimented with these approaches, trailblazers consistently reported positive effects: students and participants became more engaged, demonstrated deeper understanding of democracy as lived, participated more actively in learning for democracy and developed critical and reflective skills.

A primary educator reported that the resources supported creative, democratic classroom cultures where students learned that ideas require collective action and that collaboration leads to stronger outcomes. The Early Years and Primary Practice Companion helped them reflect on their methods and encourage holistic development, emotional expression, and community building.

A secondary teacher used the Framework and the Secondary Education Guide to facilitate workshops centred on democratic principles, community engagement and civic activities. They reported that learners were actively involved and demonstrated democratic participation in action. It was also reported that aesthetic and embodied learning approaches helped deepen understanding of concepts like the *acceptive gaze*, enriching both teacher training and student experience.

In higher education, an arts-based online reflective activity enabled students to grasp concepts in new ways and engage openly with each other, despite differing artistic skills. A university department developed a national-level microcredential course titled Education and Citizenship, embedded within a broader professionalisation programme for teachers in Portugal. Launched in March 2026, the initiative involves more than 700 teachers from all levels of education except higher education, representing a significant scale-up in teacher training efforts. This initiative constitutes a major national contribution that complements three previous European-level engagements, further extending the project's reach across a wide segment of the teaching workforce. It is implemented under a contract with the Portuguese Ministry of Education and is expected to continue in the next academic year.

Practitioners in adult, professional and organisational learning expanded dialogue so that it included embodied interaction, exploring how space influences participation and noting strong participant enthusiasm. Some trailblazers valued the opportunity to pause, reflect and view

practice through a fresh lens. Some found that the project's resources aligned with their current practice: in this instance, the project's evidence-based resources were felt to be useful in validating the trailblazers' practice.

Feedback from trailblazers on the project's resources highlighted their practicality and adaptability. Educators found them easy to customise for lessons, workshops and professional settings, while the clear structure and conceptual grounding helped deepen understanding of aesthetic and embodied learning for democracy. These qualities proved especially valuable for those less familiar with the underlying theories, offering accessible entry points as well as avenues for further study.

Motivations for becoming trailblazers were rooted in a commitment to fostering democratic, respectful and reflective spaces for learning. Many sought more structured, values-aligned approaches to civic education, or wished to enhance their facilitation skills and experiment with creative, reflective pedagogies. For others, the resources offered a meaningful way to advance equitable, values-driven professional learning and reconnect with the deeper purposes of their practice.

One trailblazer in secondary education commented:

"The motivation for using the AECED Framework and Guides stemmed from the need for a clearer and more structured approach to civic education. The Framework was useful as it helps connect theory with practical activities in teaching and in working with pupils and students. It also aligns with values such as fostering critical thinking, participation, and active citizenship. An additional motivation was the development of my own skills in facilitating workshops and working with groups."

Another trailblazer, in higher education, commented:

"For me, as a teacher, it has been very important to get to know the new pedagogical orientation. It has helped me to reflect and evaluate more my own thinking about teaching, my doings and methods I have used. In addition, the short activities have been very inspiring, and they have motivated to create different ways to use them...Students have been very pleased to[o], [with] these new ways to work together."

A trailblazer in primary education commented:

"I plan to continue using these practices regularly, especially as part of daily routines such as morning meetings or class discussions, in order to support students' social and emotional development. Small everyday activities can have a big impact on classroom relationships and I liked hearing what others want for their future."

A trailblazer in adult, professional and organisational learning commented:

"I feel it is important to avoid applying functional methods superficially. [...] many of the functional methods introduced in the AECED project were highly suitable for my purpose. It was easy to choose "a light" method that felt appropriate both for myself and for the group, and whose intended use clearly aligned with the context."

Looking ahead, trailblazers expressed clear intentions to continue using and expanding these approaches. Plans include integrating principles of aesthetic and embodied learning for democracy into workshops, cross-curricular activities, collaborative projects and ongoing professional development. Those who had previously worked with prototype versions of the resources in the early stages of the project welcomed the final Framework, Guides and Practice Companions and were enthusiastic about continuing their use beyond the project.

Increasing numbers of people and organisations will be learning of and exploring these resources: for example, currently in hand are meetings with organisations such as the International Baccalaureate and dissemination to those in positions to innovate, such as the head of a new kindergarten who has expressed enthusiasm to explore the materials. We are confident that the more who engage with the project's ideas, findings and resources, the more trailblazers there will be and the more innovative aesthetic and embodied learning for democracy will result.

6. POLICY RELEVANT EVIDENCE OF THE PROJECT

The value and importance of aesthetic and embodied learning for democracy are shown in the results of the project's research. It has a vital contribution to make to education for democracy and to help in addressing challenges facing democracy today. As explained earlier in this report, aesthetic and embodied learning for democracy can:

- cultivate qualities essential to democracy
- increase awareness of aesthetic and embodied senses and their value in democratic agency and relations
- encourage more democratic ways of learning and creating knowledge
- reframe assumptions about how democracy can be known and understood
- be a non-linear process of becoming and a learning journey where possibilities are discovered that were not expected
- enhance democratic sensibility

A key message from the project is that learners need to *experience* democracy - it must be felt, not just taught. Existing policy frameworks increasingly emphasise competences for democratic culture, learner agency, and active citizenship. Yet democratic education cannot be sustained

through knowledge transmission alone. It must be practised and felt.

Giving insufficient attention to aesthetic and embodied dimensions of learning for democracy means that we continue to rely too much on rational and cognitive learning. But learning occurs through embodied action and emotional engagement, and it is relational.

The project has discussed policy implications with practitioners and policy actors. Informed by these discussions, we want to draw attention to:

...the key issue: lack of recognition for aesthetic and embodied learning in education for democracy

...the key challenge: we need to think differently about education for democracy and learn from what the evidence tells us.

...the key response needed: integrate AELD into policy frameworks and educational practice

Recommendations for policy actors

As key shapers of educational priorities and structures, policy actors have opportunities to advance this work by considering three recommendations:

Recognise aesthetic and embodied methodologies as legitimate and important approaches in education for democracy

To drive progress in this area, policy actors are encouraged to:

1. Draw on AECED research evidence and recognise the value of AELD, especially within curricula, frameworks, and funding priorities.
2. Encourage the use of AECED resources (Pedagogical Framework, Guides and Practice Companions) to design curricula that foster collaboration, participation and democratic values.
3. Trial AELD activities in their own setting to experience and realise a 'feel' for democracy.
4. Embed AECED activities into programmes for professional learning.

Create the conditions for AELD in educational practice through making it part of education for democracy policy frameworks, curricula and assessment.

To drive progress in this area, policy actors are encouraged to:

1. Embed AELD within curricula, frameworks, and funding priorities.
2. Design curricula - with AELD in mind - that foster aesthetic and embodied learning, collaboration, participation and democratic values.

3. Rethink assessment priorities and include aesthetic and embodied ways of evaluating education for democracy.
4. Use AECED research evidence and resources to establish approaches to evaluate AELD's impact.
5. Open participatory policy spaces, support innovative use of AELD, and enable meaningful participation in governance and decision-making.

Give educators time to learn new ways of 'doing' education for democracy with AELD.

To drive progress in this area, policy actors are encouraged to:

1. Recognise the value of AELD and create protected time and space for experimentation, collaboration and reflection.
2. Draw on AECED research evidence to actively promote the use and benefits of creative and embodied pedagogies in education for democracy contexts.
3. Use AECED resources to create and support communities of practice which have creative and collective dialogue processes at their core.
4. Model democratic leadership, including by using AELD approaches in their own leadership practice.

We invite anyone concerned with education for democracy to put *aesthetic and embodied learning for democracy into action*. Explore our free-to-download resources, available from: aeced.org.

And do please get in touch - we would love to hear back from anyone who has engaged with AELD and used our free resources.