

# The living classroom for policy makers: learning democracy through action, expression and experience

## Executive summary - The gap in education for democracy

Democracy is often conceived as distant. A system, a set of rules, or a body of knowledge. Something that happens elsewhere, handled by institutions or experts. Yet democracy is also a way of relating to one another, experienced in everyday moments, in classrooms, workplaces or wider society.

To flourish, education for democracy must engage the whole person, their feelings, emotions, and bodily senses, recognising that learners need to experience democracy – to feel it, not just understand it in the abstract. Current frameworks pay too little attention to this. Aesthetic and embodied learning for democracy (AELD) fills this gap in education for democracy.

## The Research

The AECED project explored – through participatory research across six European countries and 19 case studies – how to integrate aesthetic and embodied ways of knowing into learning for democracy. The research demonstrates that AELD strengthens democratic sensibility, participation, inclusion, shared agency and institutional cultures.

## Key Findings

- Introducing bodily movements, senses and emotions in learning for democracy invites learners and educators, in all subject disciplines and across all phases of education, to be fully present and to view others as whole people.
- Creative and embodied expression helps us imagine and realise a different way of ‘doing’ education for democracy and can be embedded in any subject.
- Shared experiences of aesthetic and embodied approaches foster democratic relations and practice.
- Shared experiences of aesthetic and embodied approaches can help transform organisational habits and cultures for more democratic futures.

## Policy Recommendations

1. Recognise aesthetic and embodied methodologies as legitimate and important approaches in education for democracy.
2. Create the conditions for AELD in educational practice through making it part of education for democracy policy frameworks, curricula and assessment.
3. Give educators time to learn new ways of ‘doing’ education for democracy with AELD.

## **The living classroom for policy makers: learning democracy through action, expression and experience**

### **1. The issue: lack of recognition for aesthetic and embodied learning in education for democracy**

A key message from the AECED 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 is relational; it occurs through embodied action and emotional engagement.

Aesthetic and embodied learning for democracy (AELD) builds on existing education for democracy approaches by bringing attention to how people learn through their senses, feelings, movement, imagination, and relationships, not only through cognitive understanding. In doing so, AELD helps people develop a lived, shared feel for democracy and the values that sustain it.

#### **Why this matters**

AELD integrates cognitive, emotional, sensory, relational and imaginative dimensions of learning. It grows wherever people create learning environments that are holistic, responsive, relational, imaginative and equitable. And it works in any subject area, across all phases of education.

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

Failing to recognise the power of AELD means that learners and educators miss the chance to experience democracy as a lived, felt, participatory process.

#### **The Research Evidence**

Through participatory research across six European countries and 19 case studies, the AECED project explored how aesthetic and embodied ways of learning can be integrated into learning for democracy. The AECED resources – designed, trialled and further developed during this project – offer research-informed, practical next steps to support and enhance education for democracy with aesthetic and embodied learning and to create a living democracy in education. AECED research demonstrates that AELD strengthens democratic sensibility, participation, inclusion, shared agency and institutional democratic culture.

### Key Findings

1. Introducing bodily movements, senses and emotions in learning for democracy invites learners and educators, in all subject disciplines and across all phases of education, to be fully present and to view others as whole people.
2. Creative and embodied expression helps us imagine and realise a different way of doing 'education for democracy' and can be embedded in any subject
3. Shared experiences of aesthetic and embodied approaches foster democratic relations and practice.
4. Shared experiences of aesthetic and embodied approaches can help transform organisational habits and cultures for more democratic futures.

### 3. The response: integrate AELD into policy frameworks and educational practice

Curriculum and assessment structures shape what is possible in education. Policy frameworks shape what is possible in education. Curriculum design, assessment priorities and governance structures influence whether democratic, creative and relational learning can flourish. AELD is a new and exciting approach to education for democracy. It works through aesthetic and embodied ways of learning to address an often-overlooked dimension of learning and supports learning environments where democracy is not only discussed, but experienced.

Across Europe, education initiatives in relation to fostering democratic values and principles emphasise participation, inclusion, learner agency and the development of democratic culture. This is reflected in the Council of Europe's Reference Framework of Competences for Democratic Culture, as well as EU citizenship education priorities focused on strengthening democratic resilience and civic engagement.

AELD aligns closely with these commitments. Where European frameworks clarify what matters, AELD contributes to how it can be sustained in everyday educational environments, not only through explanation and debate, but through lived, relational and embodied experience.

The table below offers a language for talking about AELD and shows how AELD helps strengthen existing education for democracy frameworks.

European Democratic Education Priorities	How AELD Contributes
Democratic values and human dignity	Creates learning environments where equality, recognition and shared responsibility are practised in everyday interaction.
Participation and learner agency	Uses power-sharing, collaborative processes and creative engagement to make participation tangible and meaningful.
Inclusion and cultural diversity	Encourages attentiveness to lived experience, relational dynamics and intersectional awareness through embodied and dialogic practice.
Democratic competences (skills, attitudes, critical understanding)	Integrates cognitive, emotional and sensory dimensions of learning to deepen empathy, reflexivity, cooperation and ethical judgement.
Democratic resilience and engagement	Cultivates democratic sensibility – a lived feel for participation, responsibility, awareness and shared agency – strengthening societal resistance to disengagement and polarisation.

#### 4. Policy recommendations: how we build a living democracy in education

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

1. Draw on AECED research evidence and recognise the value of AELD (with funding support where needed), 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 settings to experience and realise a ‘feel’ for democracy.

##### **Examples from AECED research**

Engaging in a dance performance helped students develop a sense of community and trust within their group. The students felt they could express themselves more openly.  
(Case 10, Germany; Adult, Professional & Organisational Learning Guide, p.10, p.26).

Engaging in role play activities, where they shifted roles, enabled schoolteachers to see and experience things from different perspectives, narrow social distance, and to develop empathy  
(Case 12, Latvia; Adult, Professional & Organisational Learning Guide, p.32).

Looking again, more slowly, at the images that vocational teachers had brought to represent their learning spaces allowed them to notice details that were often missed, opening up different kinds of attention, and different kinds of conversation.  
(Cases 16&17, Portugal; Adult, Professional & Organisational Learning Guide, p.27).

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

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.

**Examples from AECED research**

Vocational teachers felt that rigid institutional structures impinged on their democratic aspirations; they appreciated that the AECED Guides legitimated the use of small-scale, situated acts of participation, such as shared decision-making, rather than abstract or idealised models of institutional democracy

(Cases 16&17, Portugal; Adult, Professional & Organisational Learning Guide, p.35).

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

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.

**Examples from AECED research**

The dedicated time, offered through the AECED project, to practise aesthetic and embodied methods and collective reflection was valued by participants, who felt that such focussed time was often missing in contemporary time-pressured work environments

(Case 18, UK; Adult, Professional & Organisational Learning Guide, p.44).

## Join us in growing a living democracy: get in touch and find out more

Put AELD into Action – use our free to download AECED research-informed resources, available from: [www.aeced.org](http://www.aeced.org).

The website contains our Connecting with Democracy Pedagogical Framework, Guides to Aesthetic and Embodied Learning and Practice Companions (activities and pathways for practice) for:

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

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

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### Disclaimer

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