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“Feeling With”: Sensory–Material Interaction and Embodied Freedom in a Progressive Democratic School in England

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ABSTRACT

The relationship between the senses and social interaction within schools is often overlooked in existing studies. Drawing on evidence generated through ethnography and Photovoice in a progressive democratic school, we apply new materialist approaches to explore the relational dynamics of affective sensorial–material interactions to afford embodied freedom. The school’s approach prioritizes “feeling with” as sensory engagement with materials, enabling negotiated comforts and expression in learning environments. We argue this approach can fundamentally reshape educational experiences.

1 | Introduction

There has been longstanding interest in the role of democratic principles in education. However, there has been comparatively less engagement with how these principles shape learning environments in embodied, sensorial, and materially affective ways. In this article, we explore this relationship through in-depth research at a case study site—“Spring School”—a democratic school in England. Like many democratic schools, Spring School seeks to share power between adults and young people, centering democratic participatory governance and democratic values to foster agency in learning and promote positive self-worth and wellbeing.

Drawing on 9 months of ethnographic research, we examine how opportunities for ‘embodied freedom’ emerge through the co-construction of the learning environment. As we demonstrate, this involves creating conditions that support bodily autonomy and accommodate diverse sensory needs. Far from being idealistic or straightforward, we explore this as a complex, relational process that requires negotiated compromises

in everyday classroom encounters. Bringing these empirical insights into dialogue with new materialist theory, we frame the school’s approach through the concept of “*feeling with*” (De Antoni and Dumouchel 2017)—an affective and critical mode of relating that enables young people and adults to express and negotiate their embodied experiences within a broader sensorial–material system.

Our analysis contributes to growing scholarly attention to the role of matter and affect in alternative education. Much of the existing literature has focused on the values underpinning specific educational philosophies (Kraftl 2013). However, following Zembylas (2022), we shift the focus from democratic education as a set of abstract principles or institutional mechanisms (e.g., school councils) to how it is felt and embodied in everyday social practice. Attending to the entanglements of sensory and materially affective dynamics—what Braidotti (2011) refers to as “assemblages”—together with the negotiation of embodied differences within these dynamics, reveals how freedom can be enacted and sustained as part of the school’s broader democratic ethos.

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Through this analysis, we argue that Spring School offers an alternative model for organizing learning conditions—one that departs significantly from conventional assumptions about optimal classroom environments, physical comportment, and movement in schools (Orsati and Causton-Theoharis 2012; Shanks et al. 2023). Offering a new lens on the school as a “sensorium” (Page and Sidebottom 2022), our research extends scholarship on democratic education by showing how schools *become* sites of “everyday democracy” (Fielding and Moss 2011, 42) grounded in reflexive cooperation as a “way of life” (Dewey 1939). In response to renewed calls to explore “what we are capable of as democratic citizens” (Apple et al. 2022, 246) and to mobilize democratic education for social justice (e.g., Aquarone 2021), we argue that our findings go beyond a particularist account of a niche educational model. Instead, they offer broader insights for education more generally, spotlighting the importance of accommodating difference through a relational, holistic, and sensorially attuned approach to learning environments.

2 | Spring School and Alternative Education in the British Context

Spring School is a charity-funded, nonselective democratic school located in a large inner-city borough in England. It serves young people aged 4 to 16, including those who have been previously home-schooled, permanently excluded from other schools, or whose parents seek alternatives to conventional mainstream education. Roughly one-third of the young people come from economically disadvantaged backgrounds. The student body is ethnically diverse, with around two-thirds identifying as White British or White European, one-sixth as Black Caribbean, Black African, Black European, or Indian, and another sixth as “White and Other,” which includes Indian, Black Caribbean, Black African, and Asian backgrounds. As is common in many English schools, the teaching staff is less ethnically diverse. The proportion of students with special educational needs and/or disabilities (SEN/D) is around 20%, comparable to regional mainstream schools.

Although democratic schools have a global presence, they remain relatively rare in the UK, forming a small but significant part of the broader “alternative education” sector. Often associated with progressive or “radical” free schools, this sector encompasses a variety of settings that offer unconventional education on the fringes of the mainstream state system. In England, this includes well-known institutions such as Summerhill (founded in 1920), as well as Sudbury schools, Forest schools, Montessori and Steiner-Waldorf schools. Many of these schools position themselves in opposition to mainstream education, challenging traditional systems dominated by market-driven values, instrumentality, and standardization which result in performance agendas, high-stakes testing, the strict regulation of attendance and behaviour (Mills and McGregor 2014; Fielding and Moss 2011), and the datafication of children—even in early years of education (Bradbury and Roberts-Holmes 2017).

Despite longstanding calls for educational reform, neoliberal agendas and austerity measures continue to exert significant pressure on the mainstream sector. Over the past decade, this has contributed to challenges in teacher recruitment and

retention, rising rates of persistent absenteeism and permanent exclusion, and a contested landscape of SEN/D support (Daniels et al. 2019). These issues are further compounded by a growing youth mental health crisis in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic (e.g., Billington et al. 2022), with an increasing number of parents opting for home education (Oliver et al. 2025). Within this context, alternative educators often work against the grain of dominant educational norms as they strive to “do education differently.” While many progressive practitioners operate within mainstream settings, much of this innovation occurs in the alternative sector, which is often free from the prescriptive mandates of state education. As scholars and activists have argued, experiments with democratic education challenge the authoritarian tendencies of traditional schooling as mechanisms for governing citizens in service of global economic competition (Fielding and Moss 2011; Apple 2015). Some efforts seek radical alternatives, while others call for a reimagining of education's epistemic possibilities beyond the institution of school itself (Collet-Sabe and Ball 2023).

Spring School seeks to challenge these conventional approaches, with its promotional material claiming UK education is overly focused on test performance and a narrow curriculum and instead advocates for a “powerful sense of agency” that enables young people to positively shape their lives and the world around them. Many adults in Spring school are critical of the volume of adult-led rules and the use of punishments to dictate how young people should learn and behave in mainstream settings (e.g., DfE 2024). Instead, they aim to collaboratively produce the dynamics and conditions for learning with young people.

One key feature of this approach is the use of sociocracy—a democratic governance model in which “circles” of peers deliberate to reach decisions by consent rather than majority vote. If any member withholds consent, the proposal must be revised until consensus is achieved. All young people and adults participate routinely in “circles” to deliberate on a range of factors impacting daily school life. For example, this includes exploring changes to the school timetable, whether items made by young people can be sold in school, and what to name the school pet fish. Circles occur within classes, at the whole school level (in the form of a school council), and can also be spontaneous, emerging in response to the needs of a situation. To support this level of participation, the school operates on a smaller scale than most mainstream institutions, with mixed-age classes of up to 12–15 students. While guided by the National Curriculum, the school does not administer national standard assessment tests (SATs), but does offer GCSEs at age 16. Its curriculum emphasizes a broad range of skills, including social and emotional development and “self-directed learning”—dedicated time during the school day when students lead their own learning.

In addition to these strategies, adults at Spring School co-construct the learning environment with students as part of its democratic ethos. This approach departs from conventional—and arguably outdated—assumptions based on historically accepted norms that define learning as a purely cognitive function, rather than embodied (e.g., Zembylas 2016). Such assumptions prioritize controlled, calm, and quiet environments, where bodies are managed to facilitate “proper” learning (Orsati and Causton-Theoharis 2012). Thus, bodily comportment, physical

movement, and sensory experience are often controlled in favor of standardized ways of being and moving in schools that reflect neoliberal and neo-colonial logics (e.g., Shanks et al. 2023; Kulz 2017; Reay 2017). In contrast, Spring School takes a different approach that tries to accommodate bodily autonomy and diverse sensory needs within the collective dynamics of the classroom. In the next section, we outline our theoretical approach to analyzing these dynamics.

3 | Conceptual Review: New Materialism, Affect, and Education

The analytical framework of this article draws on feminist new materialism—an interdisciplinary and diverse movement that conceives of humans as entangled within broader “assemblages” of materials, i.e., “more-than-human” agents (Barad 2003). The focus here is less on individual entities and more on dynamic, affective flows within assemblages, understood as “vital” networks always in the process of becoming (Braidotti 2011). Influenced by feminism, this movement attends to the “complex lineages of the materiality of oppressions” (Tuana 2021, 392) through phenomenological accounts that carefully examine the interplay between bodies, materiality, and power.

Post-humanist frameworks have been influential in educational studies. Challenging the cognitive bias in Euro-American educational philosophy, the “affective turn” in pedagogy studies emphasizes embodied experience in schools, attending to emotion as both a process and a product of teaching practices that bear affective consequences for both students’ and teachers’ bodies (Zembylas 2007, 30–31, 2016). Affect has also been explored as emerging from entangled relationships between emotion and space in educational settings (Kenway and Youdell 2011). Resonating with notions of “extended cognition”—which suggest that the mind extends beyond the body—this perspective highlights how embodiment (i.e., the bodily state of the learner), together with the material resources of the environment, actively shapes cognitive processes (Clark 2008).

In the context of alternative education, Kraftl draws on “vital materialism” (Braidotti 2011) to explore the “dis/orderly spatialities” that characterize alternative educational geographies. He argues that these spaces differ from the mainstream because they generate particular modes of *feeling*—“not only emotions but affects and atmospheres”—through which children’s capacities to learn are constituted (2013, 120). More recently, Zembylas has argued that it is not enough to talk about democracy and its values as something taught in school; rather, democracy should be explored through an affective lens, as “constantly practised and felt in atmospheres that are created to orient students towards democratic values” (2022, 560).

Taking heed of this scholarship, our approach moves beyond a focus on the discourses and philosophies that frame young people’s experiences in schools—such as institutional policies on pastoral care, models of participatory democracy, and self-directed learning, which are common in many alternative educational settings (e.g., Apple and Beane 2007; Hope 2019; Mills and McGregor 2014). Instead, we examine democracy as an embodied and affective practice, embedded in social relations

and entangled with both human and more-than-human forms. Unlike previous studies that focus primarily on either emotion and/or materiality in the production of educational affects (e.g., Zembylas 2016; Kenway and Youdell 2011; Kraftl 2013), our framework incorporates the multisensory experience of the learning environment. Recently, scholars explore the central role of the senses in pedagogy and educational experience (e.g., Davidson 2019; Harrison et al. 2017). Page and Sidebottom (2022) develop a post-humanist theory of the school “sensorium”—a holistic framework that accounts for movement, touch, sound, smell, taste, and vision in the “fleshy sensing” experiences of school life. By addressing the neglect of physical processes of embodiment in schools, their framework not only challenges the cognitive bias in education but also suggests that the sensorium is “delineated and encoded within the educational ideology and architecture of schools” (Page and Sidebottom 2022, 721).

Our intervention builds on Page and Sidebottom’s concept of the school sensorium through an ethnographically grounded analysis of the diverse sensorial and material engagements within the learning environment. In doing so, we draw on De Antoni and Dumouchel’s (2017) concept of “practices of feeling with the world”—the socio-cultural, material, perceptual, sensorial, and emotional experiences of being in and with both human and nonhuman environments. Important for our argument here, their concept of “*feeling with*” includes a focus on the senses in affect studies. They argue that previous research has often bypassed “the methodological and disciplinary differences between affect as something that necessarily moves towards a language of emotions on the one hand, and sensory perception as something separated from it on the other” (De Antoni and Dumouchel 2017, 94).

Extending this concept into the empirical context of schools, we explore how Spring School’s pedagogy operates through an affective framework of “*feeling with*”—a creative and critical mode of relating that enables young people and adults to express and negotiate their embodiment with others within a broader sensorial–material assemblage. In what follows, we outline our methodological approach before examining the school’s needs-led system, which seeks to recognize and accommodate individuals through a relational understanding of sensory preferences and material conditions. Inspired by feminist principles that foreground embodiment to challenge hierarchies of power (hooks 1994; Braidotti 2012), we highlight how such conditions can democratize embodied expression and support the co-construction of learning environments through collective negotiations of comfort and consent. We conclude by considering the implications and limitations of this approach and suggest its potential relevance beyond alternative schooling.

4 | Research Methods and Positionality

In 2021, Author 1 initiated a research collaboration with Spring School, having learned about the school through personal networks. Given their research interests, they were curious to explore the school’s distinctive model. Together with Author 2 and with the support of a Research Assistant, we worked with the school to design a research project to enhance its current practices and support its ambition to replicate and scale the model

for a broader audience. Initial guiding research questions were developed collaboratively between the authors and a small working group of teachers. These included identifying the key components of the school's pedagogical model, evidencing how educational practices, processes, and mechanisms operate, and understanding how teachers and young people experience and interpret teaching and learning on the ground.

We conducted 9 months of qualitative research at the school between January and July 2023 with 47 participants: 15 adults and 32 young people aged 6 to 14. We engaged in ethnographic with these participants across various school settings: classrooms, playgrounds during break time, the staff room, school council meetings, staff meetings, and lunch breaks. Additionally, we conducted 7 semi-structured interviews with adults and 2 post-research focus groups with 8 adults. All interviews and focus groups were audio-recorded and transcribed.

To align with the school's collaborative ethos and center young people in the research, we also employed the method of photovoice. As a form of participatory action research, photovoice aims to disrupt traditional researcher authority by involving participants as co-researchers or partners, thereby fostering more equitable modes of representation, knowledge creation, and community participation for the purposes of social action (Wang 1999). Photovoice involves participants taking photographs to document aspects of their social realities, selecting images for group reflection, and engaging in iterative dialogue to discuss key issues and generate recommendations for community change (Wang and Burris 1997). While the research did yield such recommendations, these were disseminated in a report for the school and are not included here due to the empirical focus of this paper.

We organized two sequential photovoice projects across two school terms. Each involved a group of young people and adults who participated in weekly "photo analysis workshops" and took photographs of their daily school lives between sessions. During the projects, we trained participants to use cameras provided by the school, discussed the ethics of consent in photography, and explored interpretation of visual imagery. Given the involvement of young people, we also incorporated playful and creative methods to support reflection, including drawing, playdough modeling, and organically emerging activities such as writing poems and making posters. We documented the research process through our own photographs, note-taking, and audio-recordings of the sessions, all of which were transcribed. While the presence of cameras may have influenced participant behavior—such as performing for the camera—the large volume of photographs taken by young people, many depicting mundane aspects of school life, suggests this was not a significant concern.

Following institutional ethics approval, we partnered with the school to build relationships and explain the research to young people, their families, and staff, aiming to maximize community understanding. For the ethnography, we conducted participant observation in four classes, including only the 21 young people and 15 adults who had provided consent. For photovoice, we worked with 16 young people and 9 adults, all of whom

consented to the methodology and the use of their co-produced data. Not all young people who consented to photovoice also consented to ethnography, which limited our ability to triangulate findings in all cases. Additionally, we encountered individuals across the school who did not consent to participate and thus we limited our interactions to consenting participants, all of whom are referred to here using pseudonyms. As such, the material presented reflects the perspectives of participants and does not include other viewpoints present in the school. Although our findings were informed by sustained engagement across the school, they represent partial experiences during a specific time period.

Our positionality within the school was somewhat ambiguous, which brought both advantages and challenges. As academics from an elite institution, we were acutely aware of the "naturalized" authority this status confers. We therefore made deliberate efforts to build trust with young people—not on the basis of our credentials as researchers, but as adults genuinely invested in their learning. Our age difference from the children also posed challenges in building rapport, often playing out in gendered ways (e.g., teenage boys were less inclined to engage informally than some girls and younger children). However, as parents ourselves, we gradually built relationships through play and informal exchanges. The same was true with educators; while many continued their work as we observed and followed students, others engaged us in reflective conversations about their challenges and concerns.

Our approach to data generation was informed by grounded theory (Strauss and Corbin 1994) where we re-visited the school regularly to integrate data collection and analysis iteratively. This enabled us to triangulate our findings by comparing and contrasting data gathered through various methods and from multiple perspectives. Photovoice, in particular, facilitated extensive analysis with participants, enabling the co-production of material grounded in their interpretations of school life. We cross-referenced these findings with emerging material from ethnographic observations and interviews, critically examining our own interpretations to minimize researcher bias. Following the conclusion of fieldwork, we conducted thematic analysis by coding the data to identify recurring patterns and relationships, extrapolate generalizable themes, and account for both consistency and variability in the diverse perspectives and interpretations within the school community. To further sense check our findings, we presented the results to school staff and young people, organized two post-research focus groups to discuss the thematic analysis in detail, and shared a draft version of this article with participants. We now turn to present these findings and the analysis that emerged.

5 | An Embodied and Needs-Led Pedagogy

Many aspects of Spring School's system are standardized and predetermined. This includes, for example, the use of a timetable, the use of sociocracy as a model of governance, and the content of taught lessons, as well as policies that promote expectations of community conduct, such as admissions procedures and pastoral principles. At the same time, however, other aspects of school

life are emergent, flexible, and contingent, arising from experimentation with methods to facilitate choice and autonomy in the school day. While this occurs through the formalized system of sociocracy, our research also revealed how opportunities for autonomy unfold in embodied ways in the mundane moments of school life. This involved what adults referred to as “meeting the needs” of young people—the idea that every young person will have different “needs” relating to their learning and that by striving to recognize and respond to these needs, adults can create conditions to support engagement for learning and foster a sense of belonging in school.

A “needs-led” approach to children’s wellbeing and belonging is increasingly recognized as important across a range of sectors (e.g., Burgess 2025). We suggest that a “needs-led” framework underpins Spring School’s pedagogy and pastoral work, informing how adults interact with young people and understand their learning and behavior in school. Ellie, a teacher and participant in Photovoice, evidenced this approach in a photo analysis workshop exploring the role of relationships in the school. She had taken a photograph of a young person being supported by an adult in her classroom and annotated it as a “real effort to be attuned to children’s needs” (see Figure 1). In an interview, she expanded further on this principle in practice as:

checking in with each child what they might need individually as a kind of a baseline, rather than always thinking about the group and the curriculum, but like,

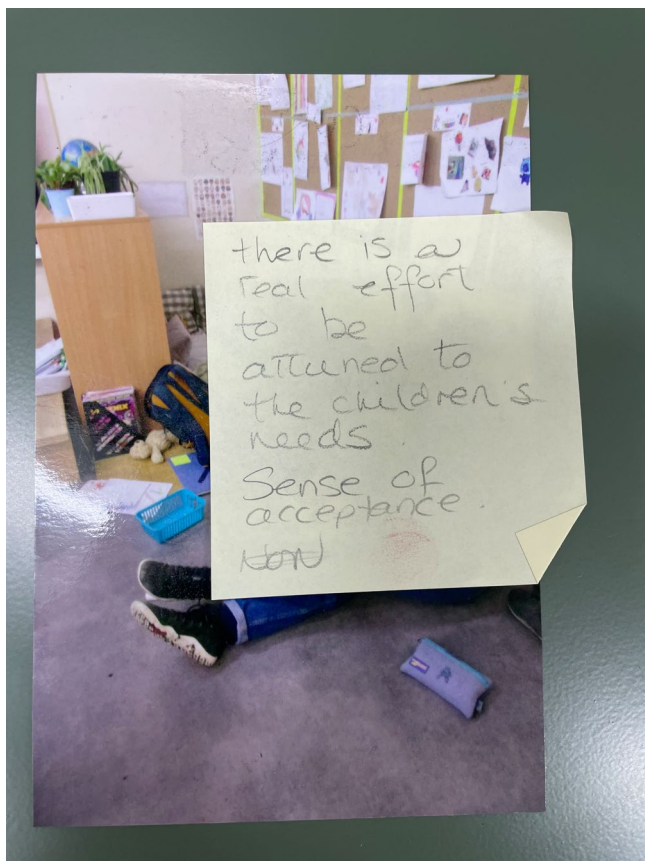


FIGURE 1 | Author photograph of Ellie’s annotated image of an adult sitting on the floor with a young person.

understanding maybe what everybody needs is like, different things and instead have the space to explore that with each child ... There’s a bit more attention to where you’re at as an individual, rather than forcing someone into what you think they should be

—interview, 05/04/2023

This personalized understanding of young people’s needs and meeting them “where they are at” as Ellie described above, is shared by many adults in the school. As we show below, adults strive to understand young people as “whole” individuals that bring distinctive emotional, social, and multisensory needs to their learning every day. These needs are also perceived of relationally and holistically, whereby adults were often observed during ethnographic research discussing possible contextual factors shaping a young person’s behavior or challenges in learning, for example, their relationships to parents/care givers, routines at home, as well as potential attachment, SEN/D or trauma issues. This point was further highlighted by a teacher, Arwen, who stated in a photo analysis workshop (16/03/2023) that Spring School was different to other settings because of their open attitude towards a range of emotional expression: “We try to be like, uh, curious and open towards them [moods], or like experimenting towards them and ... if a child is upset, or if someone else is upset, like trying to understand what the need is, or like where it comes from”.

One major way that the needs-led approach plays out in practice at Spring School is through the expression and negotiation of a broad and varied spectrum of embodied experiences, ranging from the cognitive and physiological to the social, sensory, and emotional. These embodied experiences were often referenced by teachers and young people to the different ways that being in schools *feels*. The following section explores the role of “feeling” in the needs-led approach. We unpack how lived experience emerges through sensorially mediated assemblages of human and more than human forms and, in turn, suggest that navigating these dynamics entails “*feeling with*” as a form of attunement to sensorial, emotional, and material expression.

6 | “Feeling With” and the Messy School

It was a sunny, spring morning, and Author 1 was participating in a class sociocracy circle that was being chaired by two young people. The topic of debate was changing the color of the classroom ceiling—a rather unusual occurrence in any school in England, but one that reflects the broader degree of choice facilitated in Spring School. The previous year, the young people and adults painted the ceiling black and decorated it with brightly colored space themed designs, such as planets, rocket ships and aliens. The teacher had made a proposal to change the ceiling color because they felt the color black was dark, made the space feel “oppressive” and impacted the mood of the class. They suggested changing to a lighter and brighter color, and to decorate using a style agreed by everyone—including the new members who had recently joined the class. As they started the discussion going around each member of the circle, it soon became obvious that the ceiling was more than simply a decorative background

to learning. Although some young people were receptive to the idea, offering options for how it could be changed, for example, by painting it blue and developing a “sea” theme, there was also resistance to changing the color, with one young person stating, “there are memories in the ceiling. People from last year’s class worked on it” (field notes, 09/03/2023).

The discussion ended without a resolution that morning since the young people attached to the memories of the space did not consent to the proposed change. However, the teacher, Kacey, returned to the subject later in the afternoon during a photo analysis workshop. He had taken a photograph of the black classroom ceiling to explore the group’s theme of “relationships” in school. During the session, Kacey noted he had relationships not only with people, but also with nonhuman materials, such as technology and physical space. To capture this idea, he bundled together images of objects, such as laptops, walkie-talkies, and play equipment, together with photos of the school environment, including the image of the black classroom ceiling and young people playing in the snow (see Figure 2). Reflecting on the photo bundle, Kacey honed in on his relationship with his classroom, describing it as an “organism” that “almost has a life of its own”. He continued, “it is a bit like a personality. I think a room has a personality”. He then elaborated on his feelings about the ceiling color in his classroom:

I find it [the ceiling] difficult, its oppressive, its heavy, its dark ... I don’t know how it affects my mood, but sometimes I feel like it really does. And then I think it completely sets the tone for some of their moods. Particularly first thing in the morning, particularly in winter. Yeah, I’m sure of it. You go into X’s room



FIGURE 2 | Author photograph of Kacey’s bundle of images on the theme of “materials and places”.



FIGURE 3 | Author photograph documenting a young person kneeling barefoot in activity with soft furnishings in a classroom.

[another classroom]. And it’s not about comparing the classes of anything but here is a different feeling there. And then and that instigates a different relationship to school, to learning, to each other, to like everything —photovoice analysis workshop 09/03/2023

Kacey’s analysis of the ceiling color as having a different “feeling” to other, brighter classrooms, and “setting the tone” for moods resonates with the young persons’ perspective of the ceiling “having memories” of the people who “worked on it” before. Together, their perspectives reveal the learning environment as an assemblage of both human elements, material dimensions and the relations between them to produce certain “affects”.

The example of the ceiling color chimes with other aspects of the school experience which are also “felt” through emotional, material, embodied, and multisensory registers. Across our ethnographic research, we repeatedly witnessed a range of diverse engagements with the tactile and sensory qualities of materiality across mundane moments in school. Since there is no school uniform, young people can choose what to wear to school. Many opt to be barefoot in the classroom (see Figure 3), with shoes, socks, and other items of clothing often abandoned around the classroom (see Figure 4). Diverse physical postures for learning are also commonplace, including young people choosing to sit or kneel on chairs, sit



FIGURE 4 | Author photograph documenting shoes under a desk and a resistance band strapped around chair legs in a classroom.

with one knee tucked under the arm, or simply sit on the floor—whatever position they feel comfortable in. In some cases, as seen in Figure 4, young people strap a resistance band around chair legs to push against with their feet for sensory input. Tactile soft furnishings such as rugs, blankets, and cushions are also included in every classroom, often in a dedicated corner space—named the “quiet” or “peace” corner. Young people use these spaces for their learning activities but also retire there of their own volition when feeling unwell or in need of rest. Soft toys are also present in the classes for younger children, and adults would try to provide comfort by offering these items to young people to hug or hold in moments of distress or agitation. Young people also took pleasure in including soft toys in their play and learning activities, as illustrated in Figure 5, which documents photographs taken by young people of a soft toy “modeling” for a drawing and, on another occasion “playing” a game of chess.

Classroom conditions are not only enlivened through such material and tactile engagements but also unbridled, expressive and noisy social interaction to accompany their pursuits. In self-directed time, young people in class often worked separately on an individual activity but vocalized this experience in concert with their peers nearby, sharing in each other’s experiences of learning. The learning environment was characterized by a polyvocality where young people spoke aloud “to the room” and their statement or question was met with a response from others and conversation was random, half-finished, or unanswered. This polyvocality was far more than conventional “backwards and forwards” conversation but also included noises to accompany play or the young people’s writing efforts (e.g., “chugging” sounds) and the sound of electronic devices (like Duolingo and other digital activities). This type of classroom soundscape was fairly routine and not seen as problematic for teachers or young people, indicating that noise was

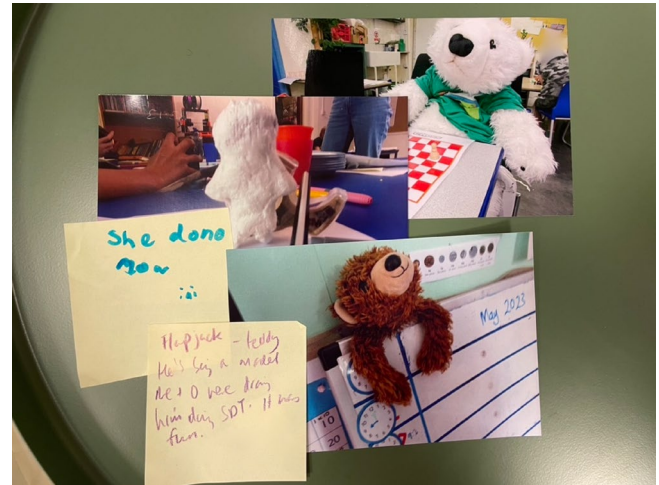


FIGURE 5 | Author photograph of photovoice images documenting cuddly toys, including a caption dictated by a young person to one of the authors: “Flapjack, the teddy. He’s being a model for me and O drawing him in self-directed time. It was fun”.

not interpreted as a distraction to learning activities, but perceived as integral to them. Thus, polyvocality extended beyond words, and as shown above, learning and play were expressed through noises, sounds and movements accompanying work and concentration in the classes in materially affective ways.

Dynamic engagements also extended to the outside environment, with young people exploring its full potential, in nature, using apparatus and other materials in messy and creative ways. Adults and young people’s photographs from the photovoice projects captured numerous examples of these material and tactile interactions and included images of activities in nature—playing with plants and mud—and young people junk modeling and building a slide from re-purposed cardboard during break time (see Figure 6). Young people also repeatedly highlighted the positive and “fun” role of such interactions in school, be this on apparatus, through creative digital games, or with materials found around the school grounds (e.g., by fixing up an old go-kart and running it down a grass slope in the playground). In particular, young people took hundreds of photographs documenting a diverse array of energetic and, at times, “risky” physical play (such as gymnastic poses, running, leaping and jumping) across different areas of the school environment—notably, the playground, the forest school, outdoor climbing frames, and in the school hall where parkour takes place. During a photo analysis workshop exploring photographs documenting the theme of “feeling happy at school” (02/03/2023), Xander shared some of his images of gym equipment in the school hall, including one of himself hanging from a gymnastic ring (see Figure 7). About this, he said: “Parkour is really good. Got like all the parkour photos. You get to flip off the stage and you get to climb things... and the playground is fun”.

In a similar vein, Yolande also analyzed the significance of play during a photo analysis workshop (23/03/2023), noting not only that she “loved” to play, but connecting play to her need to move and be outdoors to focus. She explained: “I just love play. Play in the small playground. All play on the apparatuses”. When asked a follow up question by one of the authors about why play is important to them, she continued, “[it] helps with



FIGURE 6 | Participant photograph of young people building a slide from re-purposed cardboard outdoors during break time.



FIGURE 7 | Author photograph of photovoice participant images organized on the themes of "space and play", including Xander's image of himself hanging from a gymnastic ring.

lots of energy levels. My legs would feel weird if I stayed inside all day. And play is fun. I need entertainment. Help to focus my learning". Yolande captured this sentiment by combining a playdough model of a smiling face with an image of a peer hanging upside down on playground apparatus (see Figure 8). Such physical freedom was so important to young people, that one of their recommendations for community change generated by the photovoice research was to protect time for free play and provide more time for activities outdoors, especially during their self-directed learning time. This sentiment was articulated by Eddie who explained to one of the researchers that self-directed learning "needs more of an outside element ... to run around the forest and learn about plants. Dopamine rush!" (photo analysis workshop 26/06/2023).

While engaging with the frenetic energy of young people like Yolande, Eddie and Xander was often perceived as challenging (as we explore below), it was nonetheless considered a positive aspect of the school's needs-led and pastoral approach.

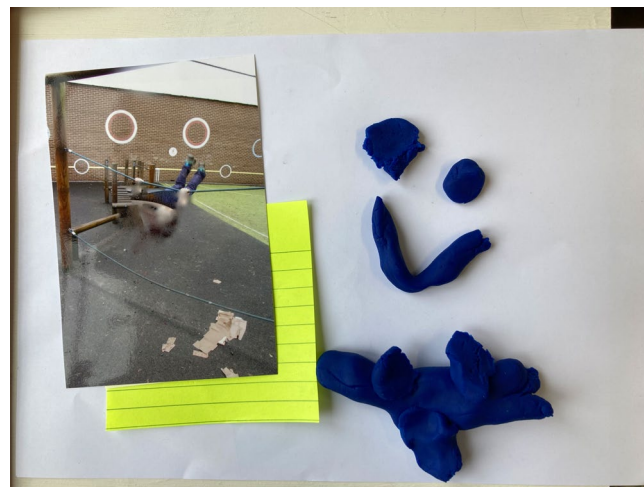


FIGURE 8 | Author photograph of Yolande's representation of play and fun in school.

Through discussion with adults across the different methods, it became clear that trying to "hold space" for expansive embodied and material expressions was an important aspect of trying to provide emotional and sensory regulation to meet young people's different needs. Rather than be stigmatized, swept away, or contained (Link and Phelan 2014) a range of emotional and sensory expression, including anger, pain and joy is therefore encouraged with a core principle that young people can be "who they are" and express themselves. This principle was documented extensively in photovoice through the concept of "experimentation", whereby adults and young people unpacked their experiences of feeling free to play and create in dynamic, imperfect and messy ways. Analyzing a photograph of a young person vigorously hitting clay with a wooden spatula in an art class, Inga, a teacher, annotated the image as "experimenting and creating through play" (see Figure 9). In the discussion (09/03/2023), she noted the importance of play to social and emotional development, interpreting the image as representative of how young people might use play as "therapy to get the anger out". This insight resonated with adults in the group and sparked analysis more broadly on the "messiness" of the school characterized not only by its physical mess but also its heightened emotional and sensory registers, prompting Inga to reflect that, "I feel the physical mess is sometimes representative of the emotional mess".

We raised the idea that the school supports freedom for embodied expression in one of our post-research focus groups held with adults to sense-check our findings. Maggie, a teacher, confirmed our view and explained further how they understood young people's engagement with clothing and soft toys as communicating a need for security, safety, and comfort:

there's a young person ... who was coming in for quite a while, comes on a bike and needed a helmet on. And she wouldn't take her helmet off because she felt, I guess she just felt secure in it, and it wasn't only her helmet it was also her coat, so she would keep it on

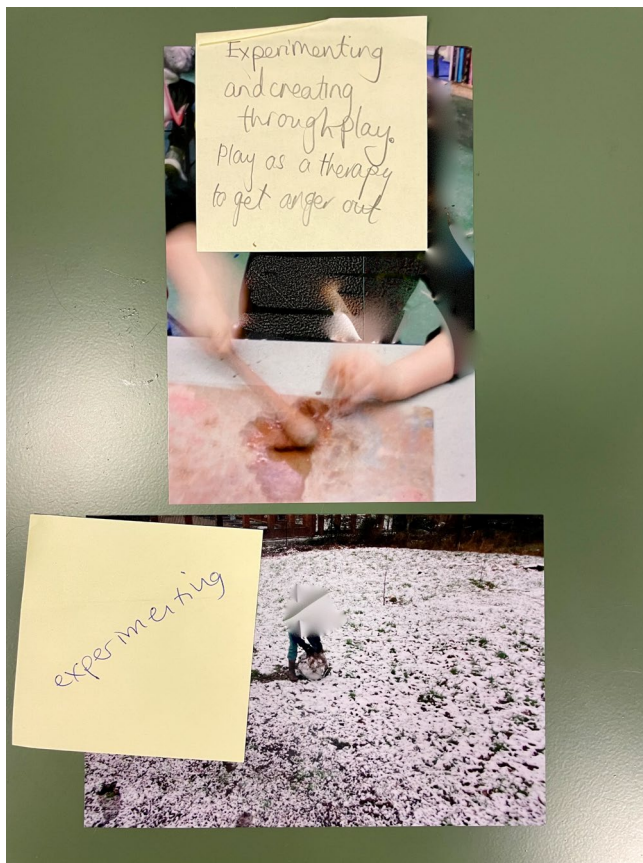


FIGURE 9 | Author photograph of photovoice participant images annotated with the theme of “experimenting”.

until she felt like she was comfortable enough to be able to take them off

—focus group, 07/03/2024

Maggie's description draws attention to how engagements with material and more than human forms are considered integral to learning experiences, understanding that wearing the bike helmet and coat offers something of a physical shell and feeling of security. This example, together with the material presented above, illustrates how a fundamental way of relating in Spring School unfolds through affective modes of “*feeling with*”—the recognition and accommodation of individual need for emotional, material, and sensorial expression across a range of human and more than human forms. We suggest these relational dynamics engender open, experimental, and dynamic interactions and conditions which are both the means and the ends of affording community members' some freedom to define conditions for learning on their own terms. This freedom notwithstanding, a key aspect of “*feeling with*” entails negotiated social interactions and the work required to compromise around differing needs and levels of comfort, to work collectively in a democratic setting. We turn to examine how this complex process unfolds in the next section, drawing attention to both its affordances and its limits.

7 | Accommodating and Negotiating Needs

Expressing and responding to a diversity of needs is integrated into the school's practice, and this is an inherently relational

process that, as we described above, gives rise to disordered but vibrant affective interactions in the learning environment (see also Kraftl 2013). At times, without effort, this led in its own organic way to ironically *more* order and control. For example, although the classrooms were often energetic environments, we were also struck by how sometimes, without instruction, they could also be incredibly calm and quiet, emerging out of a collective need at the time. On other occasions, however, preferences may clash, so the school's emphasis on learning to express needs is also accompanied by encouragement of participants' reflexivity that this may create discomfort for others, and that the collective must also be taken into consideration. In such instances, we witnessed school members confronting the conundrum of trying to balance multiple needs with a responsibility to facilitate learning for everyone in the classroom. Ultimately, such practices entail negotiations which, as we describe here, limit or prescribe activities in a way that creates an element of conformity that initially surprised us as researchers. However, by spending time in the school, we quickly learned how moments of disagreement were managed in democratic ways, with the aim being to find ways to compromise. In this section, we consider how activities require collective agreements about what types of engagements are supportive and productive, and consider the explicit acknowledgement used where certain behaviors or actions become disruptive and uncomfortable for others.

The first example we consider is fidgeting, where tolerance levels vary across classes, with no standard prescribed rule set by the school. In some classes, young people were frequently observed doodling or handling objects scattered across tables, such as pens, rulers, fidget toys, or other items created by young people themselves. In one particular class, the teacher and young people (aged 7–10 years old) had engaged in several rounds of socio-critical deliberation to explore what constitutes an acceptable level of physical activity in their classroom. In line with the school's democratic principles, the teacher did not want to impose a standardized “adult-led” rule; however, so instead tried to find a compromise that worked for everyone. This resulted in a collective agreement that permitted doodling and fidgeting (but not reading) during times of class discussion, throughout circles, or when instructions were being delivered, so long as it was not disruptive for others.

Although everyone in the class understood the agreement, young people would still push back or ignore it, for example, by insisting on vigorously jiggling a football in their lap during a circle and distracting others. In such instances, the agreement would need to be re-visited and the boundary around the behaviour re-iterated, sometimes by the teacher, or by the young people themselves. In some cases, young people would simply comply. At other times, further discussion ensued to try and understand why the agreement was not being followed. In the latter situations especially, the teacher tried to understand the “bigger picture” of the young person by trying to unpick the reasons why a young person might be particularly reticent to uphold a collective agreement—for example, being particularly tired that day, or being bored or uninterested in the topic at hand. While in most cases this curiosity led to a partnership with the young person to resolve the issue within the classroom, in rarer cases, resolutions were harder to find and resulted in restorative interventions to try and find

solutions to conflict, both between adults and young people and between young people themselves.

Second, the collective negotiation of “*feeling with*” was evident on occasions when the behavior of a young person might cross others’ “sensory boundaries” or generated a risk of harm to them. Author 2 sat through a particularly busy and chaotic science lesson where one of the young people Nathan was wandering around throughout the whole lesson carrying a large stick. The teacher instructed Nathan clearly, “you can move around the class with a stick but be aware of your surroundings. Don’t go near people’s face. If you want to fiddle with things, it’s anything on that shelf”. Here, we see how Nathan’s sensory needs were felt and acknowledged but held within boundaries safe for others by limiting the activity, as well as through redirecting him to other materials deemed more appropriate. The teacher also returned as a guest to the class’s next circle time later that afternoon with a specific purpose to encourage young people to reflect on their actions:

Teacher: Why am I here?

L: We were goofballs in science

Teacher: Yes, doing things that weren’t safe. Why were you doing that?

L: We had bags of energy (field notes 11/05/2023)

This negotiation shows how young people were able to both express themselves and also be encouraged to engage in reflection of the impacts, and to consider agreed and negotiated boundaries for future occasions. Rather than coming in to “tell off” the young people and impose rules, the educator’s questioning procedure gave agency to the young people, who knew well that the class conduct was potentially unsafe. It is further illustrative of how different classes develop unique thresholds for multisensory comfort in their individual learning environments that are worked out in practice and through dialogue.

In addition to safety, another arena of negotiation we observed is around noise. Too much noise may be considered a distraction, although what constitutes “too much” is open to interpretation and negotiation. The point at which adults and young people become negatively stimulated to noise levels differs across individuals and classes, but as we show, this appears to be derived more from the negotiation of sensorial preferences of individuals than any standard school policy about “acceptable” noise levels. First, negotiation occurs between individuals; thus, comments will be made in the moment in ad hoc ways that are responsive to the sounds occurring at the time. For example, on one occasion one of the adults working with a class noted that a girl was making origami, commenting loudly. Rather than say “don’t do that”, she simply stated her own sensory experience as “that origami noise is going right through my head [name]”, to which the girl stopped, or rather limited the noise without complaint (field notes 02/03/2023). While the teacher’s statements may be interpreted without full explanation of context as somewhat passive aggressive, we observed similar statements to be deployed by teachers elsewhere on numerous occasions as an effective strategy, where a simple statement of how the action *feels* to another person is enough to cause them to consider their effects and stop.

Where this does not work, however, the same effect could be achieved through negotiating or compromising even when sensorial preferences directly clashed in the classroom. For example, during a maths lesson, young people were working on solving maths problems. A couple of young people working together at one table started making distinctive “popping” and “quacking” sounds, as well as laughing (reflecting the polyvocal soundscape noted earlier). Two other young people working on a different table asked the young people making the noises to be quiet because it was distracting, but their request was ignored. The young people then called their teacher to their desk, informing them that there is “noise” and they can’t concentrate. The teacher asked the young people making the noises to try and be quiet, to which one of them replied, “quiet is creepy. I need sound to focus”. The teacher acknowledged this need, as well as the need of others that the sounds were distracting and offered a compromise of putting on some gentle electronic music from YouTube to fill the background. The young people stopped making the noises and no one raised the issue again. Afterward, curious about the dynamics of the situation, one of the authors asked the teacher to elaborate on their actions, who then explained: “I am trying to create a caring class with tolerance, rather than rules, so everyone can work in this class together” (field notes 23/03/2023).

8 | Discussion

Our analysis has sought to explore how diverse engagements with the affective dimensions of schooling are embodied and embedded in sensorial–material interactions. Attention to these dynamics reveals how adults strive to share power with young people as a principle of democratic practice, responding flexibly to emergent needs and interactions that arise in the everyday moments of the classroom. The analytical contribution of this insight is twofold.

First, building on the work of Page and Sidebottom (2022), we contribute to studies of affect in education by empirically integrating the role of the senses into human–material interactions in schools. Expanding scholarship on democratic education specifically, we follow Zembylas’s (2022) suggestion to examine materially “affective atmospheres” of democracy by unpacking how Spring School’s democratic values are “felt” within a needed pedagogy predicated on relations of “*feeling with*” that enable young people and adults to express and negotiate their embodiment with others within a wider sensorial–material system. As we have shown, young people are given opportunities to express themselves through a range of sensorial and emotional registers that are “held” by adults within appropriate boundaries of safety and conduct. They can move freely around the classroom, wear comfortable clothing, make sounds that support their learning, fidget with toys or doodle, and engage in learning through messy and dynamic play. Adults, too, are understood as bearing needs—equally valid, though not superior to those of young people. We argue that these experiences constitute an embodied freedom where bodies are not perceived as a distraction or site of control, but rather as integral to participation in school.

Second, these embodied freedoms—and the conditions that support them—signal an original way to conceptualize how

freedom might be afforded within democratic systems more broadly. Dewey's (1939) notion of democracy as a "way of life" is instructive here, capturing democracy not only as policy or institutional process, but also as something inhabited by individuals engaged in reflexive cooperation within communities. More than acts of empathy and care (though these are certainly important), we suggest that "feeling with" represents a form of cooperation: a mode of emotional-sensorial and material relationality aimed at producing systems of consent and compromise. Young people are educated to recognize and assert their needs, as well as to navigate situations where those needs may not be welcomed by others. Yet, as other scholars have noted, democratic schools often grapple with the extent of freedom afforded to young people (e.g., Hope 2019). Rather than conceiving of freedom as "absolute"—where young people can do "whatever they want" without consequence—scholars have proposed that democratic visions of freedom are more often negotiated as "responsible freedom" (Rogers 1969), which entails being mindful of one's autonomy in relation to others. It is precisely this kind of freedom that we think is being wrestled with at Spring School, as it seeks to balance a commitment to autonomy with participation in a cooperative environment.

9 | Conclusion

There is a high degree of sensory variance within the general population. All humans require sensory and emotional regulation to concentrate and learn, with individuals bringing unique sensory and motor needs to the classroom each day (Chaves and Taylor 2021). At Spring School, our research revealed how sensory experiences—and broader material and bodily entanglements—are recognized and integrated as fundamental aspects of everyday social interaction. Sensory variance is understood and addressed through flexible, adaptive practices, enabling both young people and adults to engage instinctively with material and more-than-human forms to navigate their environment in bodily and tactile ways. The resulting assemblage of human-material-physical activity, and the expressive polyvocality it can generate, highlights the potential of schools as affective systems where sensorial mediation between humans and materials is a central mode of engagement.

This relational approach to school "sensorium"—as systems of multisensory-material entanglement—offers a much-needed holistic and sensorially attuned perspective to school environments. Conventional educational approaches often assume that sensory stimuli such as noise, movement, and tactile engagement (e.g., handling objects or doodling) disrupt attention and listening. Behaviors like shouting out, "low-level" disruption such as chatter, and fidgeting or doodling are commonly perceived as disruptive and disobedient, to be suppressed or eliminated (see Orsati and Causton-Theoharis 2012). Our analysis draws attention to what becomes possible when individuals are given greater freedom to inhabit and express their preferences, in ways that are entangled with and negotiated alongside others. "Feeling with" recognizes that affective modes of engagement emerge organically, are instinctive and dynamic, and can often be productive for learning by meeting diverse needs for comfort.

However, this model also has limitations. "Feeling with" demands significant emotional labor from adults, who must continuously navigate the swirl of young people's diverse needs alongside their own. It is also time-consuming—the work of discussing, deliberating, and responsively addressing issues as they arise takes time, often at the expense of learning activities. While adults generally affirm the value of this deep relational work to foster positive engagement, they also acknowledge the many challenges of balancing learning with the ongoing task of "meeting needs", all while striving to minimize the imposition of adult-led rules. Indeed, in some cases, the school cannot meet the needs of all young people and openly acknowledges that its ways of working may not be the "right" fit for everyone. Acknowledging the school as a messy and experimental space (as discussed above) also entails recognition of these challenging ambiguities.

There are, arguably, both practical and ideological constraints—ranging from class sizes to adherence to national curricula—that warrant further investigation into the scalability and broader applicability of this approach. Nonetheless, our analysis highlights the implications of cultivating freedom and choice in school environments more expansively than is typical—especially in contrast to models where agency and voice are narrowly defined and often privilege the articulate few (see Bragg 2024 for a thoughtful discussion of student voice initiatives). It also critiques the dominant framing of sensory needs as exceptional, addressed only through individualized accommodations or pastoral provisions—such as when a single SEN/D teacher is seen as the one who "understands the child" (see Oliver et al. 2025), or when students are placed in spatially separate "inclusion rooms" where difference is merely tolerated. Instead, our findings demonstrate the potential of democratic learning environments that are designed with attention to their material and affective dimensions—for everyone. We suggest that this contributes to a broader social justice agenda by supporting the development of democratic citizens who are confident in expressing their needs and preferences, and possessing confidence that they can have those needs met and/or negotiated.

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