

Exploring and Combating Adultism in Early Childhood Education and Beyond

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Abstract

Let's explore adultism (in early childhood education)! The first part of the article answers seven questions frequently posed by adults who first come in contact with adultism, involving concepts of adult power, children's dependence and protection, limits, guilt, the intersectionality of discrimination, and the internalization of adultism. It explains how adultism constitutes fertile ground for the cultivation of every form of discrimination. The second part of the article focuses on remedies for adultism, specifically looking at some of the practices that we implemented in our multicultural pedagogical community with children of early childhood age. We look at basic pedagogical choices, matters of organization of time and space, and details of interactions of adults and children. The article concludes that there is no given recipe against adultism, and invites adults to discover the immense, barely charted terrain of anti-adultist action.

Introduction: The Frame

Let's talk about adultism (in early childhood education)!

First, we need to understand how adultism works. After years of exchanging ideas about the concept, I have distilled seven questions that adults who first come in contact with adultism often pose, expressing their resistance. In trying to respond to these FAQs, notions such as adult power, children's dependence and protection, personal and collective limits, and the trap of guilt show up. Deeper analysis brings us to the intersectionality of discrimination, the internalization of

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adultism and the acceptance that adultism constitutes fertile ground for the cultivation of every form of discrimination.

The second part of the article focuses on remedies for adultism, namely some specific practices that our self-organized pedagogical community on the Greek border island of Lesbos implemented. From 2017 to 2020, Mikros Dounias hosted eighteen local and thirty-one asylum-seeking children, aged 2.5 to 6 years, in a small forest inside PIKPA Open Refugee Camp. An initiative of local parents and educators, Mikros Dounias functioned on a daily basis according to the values of free experiential, intercultural, and outdoor education. I was fortunate to be a member of the pedagogical team from its founding, until the violent evacuation of PIKPA Camp by the greek state three years later.

Attention to adultism was central to our pedagogical concept since the first day of preparations. As explained below, we considered it impossible to address racism without simultaneously working against adultism. Every day, we had the chance to try things out, reflect upon them in short team meetings, and document them. Throughout this process, our personal and collective adultism-related behaviors evolved, and none of us felt lonely in our efforts.

Communicating our practices and exchanging with the wider educational community are of great importance for us. Our team is a member of the Network for Libertarian Education and Experiential Learning in the greek region. This network's pedagogical teams share common concerns about adultist society and daily try to combat adultism. Thanks to the existence of this network, I describe our pedagogical practices in the present tense, despite the fact that Mikros Dounias no longer operates as a kindergarten setting.

All aspects of adultism merit further research and broad dissemination. One specific field would be the study of expressions of adultism towards infants and toddlers, and how to practice anti-adultism in their company.

Theoretical Quest: Seven FAQs

Adult-ism is the discrimination against children on the grounds of their young age. Whereas various “-isms” have been the subject of social movements, political organizations, rich literature, and media productions, adultism is neither well known nor widely accepted as a social reality (Bell, 1995).

In 1978, the psychologist Jack Flasher defined adultism as “the abuse by adults in general of the greater power they have over any and all children” (1978, p. 517). Adultism is a social structure of discrimination founded on the imbalance of power between children and adults (Ritz, 2009, p. 127). It ascribes to children restricted capabilities, and imposes a lower status on minors (Liebel, 2013, p. 4). The essence of adultism is the distinct treatment of minors, due to judgements based on their age rather than on their actual capabilities (Zale, 2011).

Yet, as claimed by French historian Philip Ariès as early as the 1960s, child-

hood and adulthood are socially constructed classifications (Ariès, 1965), with adulthood being the ideal against which childhood was measured. Thus, it is no surprise that the latter is considered a lack, a deviation, an imperfection (Johansson, 2012, p. 102).

“All right, but...” What frequent questions express the resistance of adults who hear about adulthood for the first time?

1. Aren't There Inherent Differences Between Children and Adults?

A child and an adult can have inherent differences, for example in anatomy. Age-based discrimination begins when these differences are accompanied by moral judgments against children, which lead to treating them as inferior (Murray, 2013, p. 5).

Having studied expressions of adulthood and childhood in different cultures, Benedict remarks that western culture vastly overemphasizes any observable contrasts between adults and children (as cited in Qvortrup, 2009, p. 29). According to Fletcher, adulthood is a primary assumption of western society and its value system (2013).

2. Don't Children Depend on Adults' Care and Protection?

Children, especially during the first years of life, do depend on adults' care and protection. Discrimination begins when this protection is used to extend children's dependency beyond what is necessary (Liebel, 2013, p. 11). This does not necessarily happen deliberately; nonetheless, it has serious consequences. Over-protective behaviors can limit children's agency to the point of rendering them helpless (Liebel, 2012, p. 45). Of course, overprotection is also unpleasant and time-consuming for adults; discrimination is strenuous for everyone involved (Ritz, 2008, p. 13). Adults can keep in mind that children are capable of, verbally or otherwise, expressing their need for safety and their opinion on the nature of their protection. Protection can be mutually shaped by children and adults (Liebel, 2012, p. 45).

As a result of children's dependence on adults, adult power over children exists and does not constitute a problem in itself; what adulthood refers to is the misuse of adult power. As Fletcher puts it, bias towards adults can result in discrimination against children, but it can also help adults to keep children “fed, safe, supported, thriving, and empowered” (2022). Adults can use their power to enable children's agency and participation and become real allies for them.

3. Don't Children Nowadays Exercise Power Over Adults?

In their first acquaintance with adulthood, some adults object that “today's children” tend control their families and are spoiled, out of control, and bossy

towards adults. Such statements are linked to our adultist practices, and can be avoided through a less adultist overall approach towards children—for example, taking them seriously, and letting them share in responsibilities that have to do with their lives.

Children do not possess power over adults. As Jesper Juul points out, even when they feel completely powerless, parents continue to have legal, economic, physical, and psychological power over their children (2009, p. 13). Back in the 1990s, Bell remarked that—except for prisoners and other institutionalized people—children are the most controlled group within society. They are told “*what to eat, what to wear, when to go to bed, when they can talk, that they will go to school, which friends are okay, and when they are to be in the house*” (1995).

4. And What About Limits?

It is important to clarify that anti-adultist approaches do not imply a lack of boundaries in intergenerational coexistence. The aim is rather an equal coexistence of adults and children, in which every person respects both their own and the other’s personal limits; all together, they agree on and respect collective limits.

The handbook of the *Network for Libertarian Education and Experiential Learning* (2024) says that limits in the network’s pedagogical communities exist not in order for children to learn to respect them, but rather to give children the chance to experience respect. They do not want children to fit into already existing boundaries, but instead to co-develop them, and to understand that limits derive from the need to coexist with others.

To support children in exploring limits, adults can act as role models by training themselves to recognize and express their own feelings and limits, without misusing their power.

5. If Adultism Mattered So Much, Wouldn’t Children and Youth Themselves Protest Against It?

First, children do self-organize themselves and protest in different ways in different parts of the world, whether or not adults recognize these protests for what they are. Second, puberty is related to the discrimination that children face since birth, and its various expressions can be seen as a form of struggle against this discrimination.

However, I want to focus on one important reason why children do not respond in mass to this injustice: namely, their own internalization of adultism.

Internalization of any form of oppression happens when the dominant group’s ideology is adopted by its victims, who accept their inferior status as natural, deserved, and inevitable. Children internalize adultism in several ways: by adopting adults’ opinions about them, although they themselves initially felt differently (Ritz, 2009, p. 137); by assimilating—and seeing as justified—the adultist behav-

iors they experience; by being persuaded of their low value and dependency, and viewing themselves as irresponsible, incompetent, inexperienced, foolish, mediocre (Holt, 1989, p. 82); and by not taking themselves or their peers seriously (National Coalition Building Institute—NCBI, 2004, p. 10).

That last point is critical: taking oneself seriously leads to being taken seriously by others (NCBI, 2004, p. 12). A vicious cycle arises as feelings of powerlessness, worthlessness, and lack of confidence—all derived from internalized adulthood—influence children's behavior, tenacity, daring, and capabilities (Bell, 1995).

6. Wouldn't It Be More Thoughtful to Address Actual Discrimination Forms, Such As Racism, Instead of Constructing New Ones?

This question is very “hot” for us, as our kindergarten setting hosted both local and asylum-seeking children inside a refugee camp, on a border island where expressions of racism and xenophobia were gradually rising. Addressing racism was one of our principal goals, as was experiencing diversity as a source of enrichment for the group, rather than as a problem to solve. We envisioned a pedagogical community that would not aim to integrate “other” children into a dominant greek culture, but rather to honor the cultural capital of each person, recognizing their complex and unique identity.

Could we do that, while disregarding other forms of discrimination? The answer is an emphatic no. The theory of intersectionality of discrimination needs to always accompany our analysis: adulthood, racism, and other forms of discrimination are interconnected, work together, and constantly feed each other. An individual who is a member of multiple minority groups experiences increased discrimination, for each group they are identified with (Amoah, 2007, p. 6). As a result, less privileged members, who face multiple marginalizations, can be found within minorities (Nash, 2008, p. 4). Children who face discrimination on any other ground than their age are automatically multiply burdened members of the respective minorities; the result is a multiplied discrimination.

Moreover, the interconnection between different forms of discrimination does not end here. Why do people tend to permit, accept, and exert discrimination? Because of adulthood, claims Ritz (2009, p. 127). As the following points show, adulthood actually constitutes fertile ground for the cultivation of the various types of discrimination:

Firstly, adulthood is the only form of discrimination that every human being experiences, no matter the degree or the cultural variety (Bell, 1995). As Alanen points out, the social world is not only gendered, classed, raced, etc., but also “generationed.” We should not overlook the “generational segment” of the experiences of the “human individuals that we in everyday speech call children,” because generation—as a dimension of personal and social organization—is equally

important to gender, class, and nationality (Alanen, 2009, p. 162).

Secondly, adultism is the first form of discrimination that people experience while building their identity. In the first years of their life, during which learning is mostly unconsciously absorbed, children experience the sensations of power, lack of power, and misuse of power (Ritz, 2008, p. 13; 2009, p. 141). People who love them and whom they love show them, in practice, that discrimination and oppression are acceptable (NCBI, 2004, p. 12).

Thirdly, childhood displays almost absolute mobility towards adulthood (Qvortrup, 2009, p. 28). Unlike in other forms of discrimination, every victim of adultism gets the chance, a few years later, to exercise discrimination on the same grounds (Ritz, 2009, p. 141). Also, as with all forms of discrimination, a recipient can pass the violence they experience on to weaker recipients. The principal victims of children that have experienced adultism are younger children, children that are less powerful physically or intellectually, children whose parents have a lower social status (Flasher, 1978, p. 522), and non-human animals. Miller explains that children get the chance to pass on their own humiliation by exerting power themselves: "As long as there are even weaker, more helpless creatures than they, they are not the lowest slaves" (1983, p. 147).

To sum up: adultism instills patterns of discrimination in every person, from a very young age. As new forms of discrimination are introduced in the course of one's life, chances are that they will be received as natural and "normal." According to Bell, a person might continue tolerating discrimination on different grounds, and/or reenact their experience upon less powerful creatures (1995). In essence, by introducing the experience of discrimination, adultism facilitates the tolerance and exercise of other forms of discrimination. Adultism becomes the fundamental "-ism," which sets the stable foundation for every other "-ism" (NCBI 2004: 12).

7. I Am a Terrible Adultist! What Do I Do Now?

By examining the nature of these first six questions, we realize how deeply rooted adultism is in our mindsets. In order to act against it, we need to question every intergenerational experience that we have had so far. And that can be hard!

It often happens that people who come into contact with, and are persuaded by, the concept, suddenly realize how adultist they have been in their personal and/or professional lives. At this point, guilt appears. We need to understand that changing our learned behaviors requires a lot of emotional and cognitive effort, which takes time; guilt cannot help us, and might actually "freeze" us. The very act of recognizing behavior as adultist is a first step forward; after all, we can then often immediately "correct" our behavior, for example by apologizing to a child.

We suggest reconsidering the assumption that the institutionalized contexts where we meet children are incapable of change; changes are possible everywhere. What we can do is study about the topic; educate ourselves further by

being in honest contact with children; share our insights; and inform other adults. Building up trusting relationships with adults who share the same concerns helps us to be alert to adultist behaviors, to discuss them, and encourage each other to behave differently.

For better or worse, there is no recipe to fight against adultism. We can seek out and discover many innovative approaches in this almost uncharted landscape. The more we try, the closer we come to children and the more we come to understand their situation. From that point on, we might not be able to stop: adultism is everywhere and our actions count!

Moving Towards Solutions: Our Experience in an Early Childhood Setting

Education is adultist (Fletcher, 2015 a & b; NCBI, 2004, p. 57). Adultism in education, as an expression of institutionalized adultism, has negative impacts on children's daily lives, and results in oppressive social relations (Le François, 2014, p. 47); it "leverages, perpetuates, and instills" adultism throughout society (Liebel, 2014). Some key characteristics of this dynamic include: the compulsory character of schooling; children's daily segregation from society (Fletcher, 2013); adult-designed curricula; the teacher as a symbol of authority; punishment, evaluation, and reward.

In the paragraphs to follow, I discuss anti-adultist approaches in early childhood education, drawing from our experience in the multicultural pedagogical community of Mikros Dounias.

On Basic Pedagogical Choices

Mixed Ages: Associating a child's age with their capabilities is not inevitable or "normal" (Woodhead, 2009, p. 51). The children of Mikros Dounias, whose ages varied from 2.5 to 6 years, spent their days all together, constantly learning from one another. We observed that age did not significantly influence their interactions, and we adults tried to consciously empower peer relations. For example, when a child asks us for some help or information that another child can provide, we can encourage them to ask their peer.

Fostering Autonomy: We systematically support children in pursuing their autonomy, which we consider the fundamental requirement for liberation and freedom. Autonomy in early childhood is linked to basic skills: can a child get dressed and put on their shoes, can they find their water bottle and be responsible for their bag? After patiently supporting children in acquiring such skills, we abstain from assisting them. This is because when we help children do what they are themselves capable of, we are serving ourselves or the daily program rather than the children.

Shared Responsibilities: We share with the children responsibilities that concern the community, such as preparing our group snack, setting the table, tidying up, and cleaning. We have observed that children are not only capable of contributing, but in fact happy to take on responsibilities.

Children's Assembly: We stand strongly in favor of children's assemblies. We have seen that, with suitable preparation, even very young children can learn to express themselves in a circle, and participate in decisions that affect their lives (*Network for Libertarian Education and Experiential Learning, 2024*). Since our own community spoke five different languages, the closest that we got to a children's assembly was for everyone to answer "how am I today?" and "what do I want to play?" Still, in this circle, we listened to one another, looked into each other's eyes, and strengthened our sense of being a team.

Recognition instead of Praise: We recognize the dangers of praise, as an (often unconscious) means of latently imposing adult values and opinions upon children; motivating children is only a few steps away from manipulating them. Instead, we try not to alienate them from their intrinsic motives, and to allow them full agency for their learning. Meanwhile, we avoid publicly praising children, as it can promote competition among peers.

What can we do in order to empower children, since praising often brings the opposite result? Instead of expressing ourselves with enthusiasm (which, after all, might mean that we did not expect so much from the child in the first place), we explicitly describe what we see. We focus on the process, not the outcome, and encourage children to do the same. We support children in developing self-evaluation skills, while unconditionally recognizing the inherent value of each child and constantly expressing our love towards them.

(Free) Play: We believe in free play, or actually, just "play," as play by definition needs to be free in order to truly be play. Our field experience and reflection in team led us to let the children's play evolve without intervening, trusting the children to experiment, learn, and process themselves and their relationships. We do not call "play" the playful learning activities initiated by adults, so as not to fall into the trap of instrumentalizing play, i.e., turning it into an instrument to achieve certain results. As children know and adults tend to forget, play is not motivated by specific goals: it is a meaningful, valuable, self-worthy occupation, which does not need further justification.

Conflict Resolution: The resolution of conflict without adult intervention is more meaningful and can be less complicated. Instead of intervening in the moment, adults can—beforehand—supply children with tools that allow them to solve their conflicts on their own, such as an hourglass that facilitates taking turns, or the word "stop" that can interrupt every action.

In case the violence is escalating and we feel that we have to intervene, we do

so with respect. Only one adult approaches the children. She makes sure that she can remain calm and neutral; if she can't, it is recommended that another adult replaces her. If she needs to physically separate the children, she uses as little physical power as possible. At this point a hug can be useful, always with the children's consent, and still without taking sides. When the tension decreases, the adult and the children can talk about the incident and their motives; the adult explains that she has intervened because her own limits were crossed. She does not offer ready-made solutions, but rather discreetly supports the children in finding their own.

On Time and (Outdoor) Space

Time: The perception, use, and management of time are directly linked to self-regulation, autonomy, and power, but unfortunately children are not often included in managing their time. A day in Mikros Dounias contains set routines, which offer a feeling of safety and connect the community more closely. That said, participation in routines and activities is optional. During organized activities, we make sure that a second adult is around and not involved, so that children can abstain or quit. Moreover, we explain to the children that we adults want to participate in the daily routines, but at the same time need to be able to see everyone, as we are responsible for their safety. This way, if a child does not want to participate, e.g., in the closing circle, they understand that they need to stay near the circle, so that they can see us and we can see them. In this case, restraining children spatially enables us to not restrain their time. As the months go by, children grow increasingly confident in managing their time.

Moreover, we warn the children in advance for any upcoming change. When a shift in the program approaches, we try to warn them twice, e.g., 15 and 5 minutes before snack. This way, they have enough time to prepare themselves and decide how to handle the change. Furthermore, before talking to a child, we take a moment to observe what they are doing; we do not interrupt their activity, which we perceive as important, unless necessary.

Last but not least, the time is now! In order to treat children fairly, a society needs to value them for who they are, not as future adults (Farson, 1974, p. 10). In Janusz Korczak's words, we need to recognize children as beings and not beings (2004, p. 27).

Space: Much architecture reproduces discrimination against children; most of the constructed world is made for healthy, able adults, and inhibits children's access and free movement. The space of Mikros Dounias allows children to independently fulfill their daily needs and desires. We carefully observe children's spatial preferences and habits, ask them for their opinions, and readjust the environment together with them.

Nature: Heldal et al., who conducted research in Mikros Dounias, remark

that by being diverse and multifaceted, the natural environment offers challenges and possibilities for all children, irrespective of their cultural background, gender, and age (2021). Indeed, our presence in nature alleviates differences and offers tangible ways out of cultural classifications. The natural environment does not reproduce stereotypes related to...

...culture: Buildings, materials, and books carry cultural characteristics, whereas the stimuli and materials we encounter in nature for discovery and play are free from expressions of the dominant culture. Nature is culturally neutral.

...gender: In nature, there are no materials or activities intended solely for boys or girls. The branches are not pink or blue depending on whom they are addressed to. Nature is gender neutral.

...age: In the natural environment, children often prove to be more competent than adults—for example, in being in the here and now; noticing details; listening, smelling, and using all their senses; and approaching other living creatures. They are freer to act on their initiative than they are in a house built and decorated by adults. Moreover, the ample space enables every child to choose whether or not to interact with others; in Mikros Dounias, children often choose to walk away in order to calm down, think, or play on their own. Having to be with others throughout the school day can prove very challenging for some children.

On Communication and Interaction

◆ Research shows that very young children are capable of expressing their views, when adults choose appropriate ways of communication (Murray, 2013, p. 11). It is often the manner in which adults transmit information—and not its actual complexity—that renders the communication hard (Ritz 2008, p. 8). In Mikros Dounias, we are constantly looking for apt ways to communicate with each child, verbally or otherwise. We do not forget to listen carefully, and sometimes we need to remain silent a bit longer than we expect. Every day, we experience that communication is possible beyond common linguistic codes, and that love, safety, and eye contact facilitate it.

◆ Adults often misinform children, withhold information, and manipulate them with fake justifications, which they consider easier to understand or less painful. Yet children are capable of judging on their own which information is relevant to them. In Mikros Dounias, we consistently try to accompany children in their difficult mission to understand the complex reality of adults. This helps us avoid speech which disorients, obscures, or oversimplifies, and brings us back to speaking the truth.

◆ Humor helps us form equal relationships that are free of fear and coercion. Gray (2019) sees humor and play as powers that can prevent aggression, dominance, and hierarchy; we confirm! We choose to laugh with—and not at—children.

◆ Children know best about themselves and can accurately recognize and communicate their needs since the first days of their lives. We do not anticipate or decide children's needs, but try to support them in expressing and fulfilling them. Moreover, we try not to make assumptions or interpretations about children's tastes or their present mood.

◆ We only touch a child or step into their vital space when we are sure of having their consent at that very moment, and we always try to recognize and respect the distance that children choose to keep from us (Holt, 1989, pp. 94, 99). Instead of taking a child's hand in ours, we propose our hand to them; instead of hugging a child, we open our hug.

◆ We choose to lead authentic conversations which are interesting for both sides. We avoid asking children things that we already know, e.g. "*What color is this?*"

◆ When talking with or about kids, we avoid using diminutives. Moreover, we do not use adjectives to characterize them (smart, aggressive, beautiful, etc.), in order not to trap them into adult-assigned roles.

◆ We abstain from formulations that reproduce adulthood: "You're too young to understand;" "These are grownup issues;" "Your sister behaves like that because she is too young to know better;" etc.

Conclusion

Let's talk about adulthood! In the first part of the article, after giving a definition of adulthood, I try to answer seven questions frequently posed by adults who first come in contact with the concept; we discuss power, dependence, protection, limits, guilt, and the intersectionality of discrimination. The article goes on to show how children internalize adulthood, diminishing their actual capabilities and contributing to a vicious cycle of unequal intergenerational relationships. Moreover, we see that adulthood forms a solid foundation upon which to build other forms of discrimination.

Furthermore, the article states that there is no recipe to fight against adulthood. The terrain is immense and rather uncharted. It is critical both to educate ourselves on the subject, and also to learn through honest contact with children. Moreover, we need to build up trusting relationships with adults who share the same concerns, and help each other grow out of learned adultist behaviors.

Let's talk about adulthood in early childhood education! In the second part of the article, I seek remedies, drawing upon our practices in a multicultural pedagogical community with children of early childhood age. I present some of the basic choices of our pedagogical team, such as mixing ages, fostering autonomy, sharing community responsibilities with children, choosing recognition instead

of praise, and allowing free play. Next, I describe how we organized our time and space in order to reduce adultism, and argue that nature can play a role to balance certain forms of discrimination. Last but not least, I detail how we communicated and interacted with children in our constantly-trying-not-to-be-adultist frame.

Let's be allies in this continuous struggle for the liberation of children—and adults—which can turn the current social reality upside down!

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