

ADULTISM & ADULTIFICATION

YOUTH-ADULT RELATIONSHIP DYNAMICS IN K-12 SCHOOLS

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January 10, 2022

Our contemporary socio-political landscape contains far too numerous examples of oppression, dehumanization, and prejudice. These systems are often replicated in our educational institutions and require urgent attention. Within this context, we fix our gaze on intersectional understandings that might help educators think deeply about how they show up for and work alongside youth in systems of teaching and learning. Drawing on the existing research and lived experiences of scholars, educators, and students as well as our knowledge from working with formal and informal educators across the country, we want to put “adultism” and “adultification” into conversation with each other through a lens of race and power.

ADULTISM is the “behaviors and attitudes based on the assumption that adults are better than young people, and entitled to act upon young people without their agreement”.

ADULTIFICATION is 1) a process of socialization, in which children function at a more mature developmental stage because of situational context and necessity, especially in low-resource community environments and 2) A social or cultural stereotype that is based on how adults perceive children “in the absence of knowledge of children’s behavior and verbalizations (in part based on race).

Adultism and adultification are both ways that adults may knowingly or unintentionally discriminate against and cause harm to children and youth, although their underlying beliefs and expressions are unique. This piece will examine how both manifest in schools and seek to identify strategies that bring adults and youth into closer, more authentic partnership. It should also be acknowledged that



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adultism and adultification (and other privilege imbalances, such as racism and sexism) are present in our shared American society. When adultism and adultification show up in schools, they reinforce and perpetuate the oppression children and youth already experience in our culture. This exploration is of profound need at this moment as we witness a renewed and deeply necessary reckoning with the inherent racism embedded within our education system.

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To understand the relationship dynamics between adults and students, we must first understand what it means to be a child. Emerging from late-nineteenth-century children's labor movements and the resulting protections afforded to youth, social norms shifted to provide [broad guidance about how we differentiate children from adults](#). There were many positive and significant outcomes of this time, including Child Labor Laws. However, it is worth noting that the protections afforded to children against labor came burdened with harmful effects as well.

First, youth were excluded from labor practices and thus rendered incapable of producing capital that directly benefits the market economy, diminishing children's value in a capitalist society. Coupled with not being allowed to vote until the age of 18, their lack of political and financial potential continues to be prevalent rationales for not engaging children in critical aspects of our society. Second, and of specific importance for our work, Black and Brown children were not afforded the same protections afforded white children. This reinforced our country's white supremacist laws and cultural practices and caused significant harm to Black and Brown children. While education was prioritized for white children, Black children were still enslaved and forbidden from learning to read and write. Even after Reconstruction and as child labor laws emerged, [Black children were often still forced into mandatory apprenticeships](#).

Black children were also vulnerable to a legal system that dolled out disproportionate punishments and a society that often [executed punishments on very young Black children \(children as young as 11 years old were lynched\)](#).

These outcomes of the child labor movement are of particular interest as mandatory schooling was a response to this movement. School filled both a need to occupy children and establish a means of 'training' youth for life as a 'contributing member of society.' The goal was to move students to adulthood fully formed as a person capable of meaningful thought, speech, and action in a capitalist economy. Simultaneously, schools functioned to remove students deemed incapable of becoming contributing members of society via the school-to-prison pipeline (or, as abolitionist David Stoval says, the school-to-prison nexus).

Adultism and adultification, as we identify them today, become an outgrowth of the child labor movement. This is not to suggest that adultism and adultification cannot be found prior to this historical moment. Instead, we want to offer that the insidious nature of adultism and adultification as it manifests after the child labor movement and compulsory schooling still profoundly impacts learners and disproportionately affects Black and Brown learners in our education systems today.

ADULTISM

Adultism refers to the beliefs and behaviors that infantilize children and youth, removes youth agency, and limits adults' ability to recognize the contributions of which children are capable. Said another way, it is the belief that "adults know best." The desire to 'protect' children (innocence, against manipulation, violence, coercion, etc.) is not inherently problematic. However, we understand adultism as an exaggeration of these inclinations to hold undue power over children, often resulting in the dismissal, restriction, and discrimination against youth.

One way adultism can show up in our schools is through a teaching pedagogy that aims to "fill an empty bucket" with information, assuming that students are not bringing existing knowledge and

learnings with them. While many educators today do not believe in a one-way transfer of knowledge (such as lecture style), a meaningful partnership between adult and student, or authentic student voice, is still rare in schools today. More often, a tokenized or a convenient form of student voice is employed.

Convenient student voice can look like a student representative on the school board who only gets to report on student activities but not weigh in on decisions, or the allowing of students to choose a homecoming theme but not give their perspective on the school's new discipline policy. In younger grades, students are often given student choice (ex: Which of these books would you prefer to read?). Student choice is an excellent scaffold to student voice, but frequently there are no opportunities for students to move from "choice" to "voice" to "agency." Another way to observe adultism in a school is to assess the physical spaces and who "owns" those spaces; typically, hallways and cafeterias are student spaces while classrooms, gyms, and teacher lounges are adult spaces. Additionally, student spaces are often owned by students only to a point - adults still surveil behavior. Rarely are spaces mutually owned by adults and students, such as an individual teacher's classroom or an auditorium.

Looking at Hart's Ladder provides a valuable framework for thinking about how students are vital pieces of purposefully structured, deliberative conversations in teaching and learning spaces, and for observing how adults engage students. Hart's Ladder offers a helpful reflection by naming a range of contexts for adults and youth to relate - are adults providing opportunities for students to engage in the top two-thirds of the Ladder rungs? Youth agency and voice are critical elements to be scaffolded in the same ways an educator would approach any other learning outcome or objective. Doing this requires deeply intentional work lest we risk adultifying learners in dangerous and inappropriate ways.

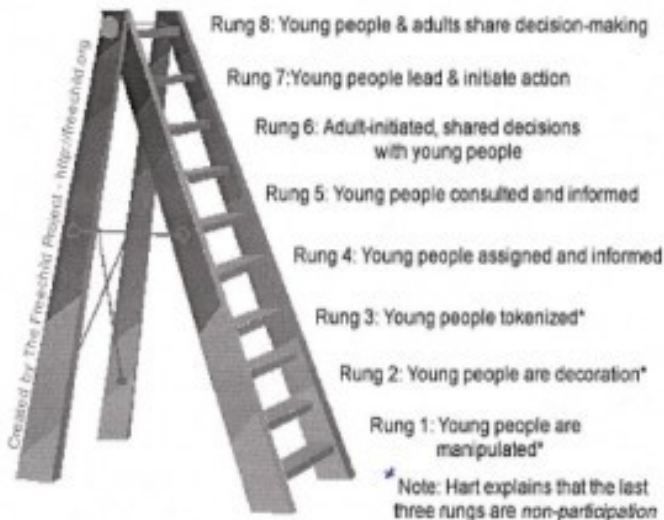
ADULTIFICATION

Adultification is a term that has multiple framings depending on the context within which it is used. For our purposes, we use adultification to identify the specific biases that prevent youth from being treated with the affordances of innocence, developmental possibility, and growth that define this period of development. Our particular interest here is at the intersection of adultification and anti-racism, believing that adultification is a *"...form of dehumanization, robbing Black children of the very essence of what makes childhood distinct from other developmental periods."*

In schools, adultification can look like decreasing recess time, lowering the grade level for high-stakes testing, or pushing down the curriculum for students. In the disciplinary context, we can readily see that punitive practices are not intended to help either the party who was harmed or the party causing harm. At any age level, these practices disrupt relationships, trust, and the construction of learning communities in favor of punishment without the opportunity for growth and reflection.

The particular ways adultification is weaponized against Brown and Black in society and schools robs them of the playful and curious childhood we often allow for white children and can have dangerous consequences. In the 2014 report ["The Essence of Innocence: Consequences of Dehumanizing Black Children,"](#) researchers noted that "Black boys can be

Roger Hart's Ladder of Young People's Participation



Adapted from Hart, R. (1992). *Children's Participation from Tokenism to Citizenship*. Florence: UNICEF Innocenti Research Centre.

From [Learn, Garden & Reflect with Cornell Garden-Based Learning](#)

misperceived as older than they actually are and prematurely perceived as responsible for their actions during a developmental period where their peers receive the beneficial assumption of childlike innocence". In a [2017 study by the Georgetown Law Center on Poverty and Inequality](#), they found that Black girls are perceived to be "less innocent and more adult-like than their white peers, especially in the age range of 5-14". The implications of these beliefs can manifest in severe ways, especially when an adult's subjectivity controls decision making, usually involving discipline and punishment. This can be the disparate enforcement of dress codes, "disrespectful" talk, being "too loud," or assuming Black and Brown students are "tougher" than white students. [One study](#) discovered that Black boys were 1.5x more likely to be disciplined for disruptive behavior (than white boys) and Black girls were 3x more likely to be disciplined for disruptive behavior (than white girls).

These subjective infractions are often used as leverage to push students into the carceral system. Another [2017 study by the National Women's Law Center](#) found that even though Black girls made up only 15.6% of the student population, they were 28.2% of referrals to law enforcement and 37.3% of girls arrested at school (by comparison, white girls made up 50.1% of the student population and only 34.4% of referrals to law enforcement and 30.2% of students arrested at school). These students who are being adultified often experience the intersection of multiple dehumanizing beliefs enacted upon them; of being in an adultist system of school, being adultified by adults in the school, and being Black and Brown in a white-dominated society.

"...[T]eaching must begin with solving the teacher/student contradiction, by reconciling the opposite poles, so that both parts are both teachers and students at the same time. And in such a manner that the students' creative ability isn't belittled or destroyed, and their credibility enhanced."

- Paulo Friere

Paulo Friere offers a vision for how we might interrupt adultism and adultification in our classrooms.

Acknowledging that we have a teacher/student contradiction in our schools and learning to recognize how schools (and society) perpetuate this contradiction culture is a core first step. This knowledge allows us to reflect on our own role in maintaining adultism and adultification. The following questions offer a place to start on your own reflection:

- What are my beliefs about children and youth? How did I learn these?
- How does the race or background of students impact my beliefs about specific children or youth?
- What might be possible if I renegotiated these beliefs with myself? What can I do to actualize this new belief in my practice?

Adultism and adultification are present in schools and in our broader society. While individuals in schools create spaces and moments that relieve students from adultism and adultification, these harmful beliefs and systems still exist. Importantly, because adults are bestowed power in our adultist society, this power can be used to challenge and interrupt the perpetuation of adultism and adultification.

On an interpersonal level, adults can honor the wisdom, experiences, and knowledge children bring. Adultism and adultification dehumanize, but relationships can re-humanize. Adults can also embrace the beautiful humility in seeing oneself as a curious learner. This allows anyone, including young people, to be a teacher. On a classroom level, there is an opportunity to create a microculture that rejects adultism and adultification. How might "the way we have done it every year" be disrupted to create instead an environment where everyone, including the teacher, is respected, has agency, and fosters a thriving learning community? Imagining what society could be is an abolitionist practice. Some of the thought-leaders in this field are the Abolitionist Teaching Network, Abolitionist Kindergarten, People In Education, and Ghody Muhammad's literature circles. On a systemic level, adults can challenge systems and other adults to examine adultism and adultification in their work and themselves, especially in places and conversations where students are not given access or respect to advocate on their own behalf. While the beliefs and

culture of adultism and adultification may feel overwhelming, every individual has the power to interrupt systemic outcomes.

Friere posits a vision for youth-adult relationships that is mutually respectful and celebratory. Moving beyond the child-adult binary can offer beautiful ways of being in relationship with others. Krista Tippett, author and host of the podcast “OnBeing,” describes the need for intergenerational relationships and the unique strengths that can be brought together.

“I think it’s really a calling for this century because the wisdom of young adulthood, I think, is actually an urgency and an impatience and this longing and this aspiration to see the world whole and make it better. We want that. But there’s something so relaxing about living for a while and knowing in your body that life is long and knowing that there will be another side to whatever is happening.”

- Krista Tippett

What could intergenerational learning look like in schools? What might be possible if we saw everyone in a school as “both teachers and students at the same time”? How can we move beyond the adultism and adultification in schools, to create something new that sees and celebrates the humanity in all of us?

We have had the privilege of learning from and being inspired by all the scholars cited in this work. However, we would like to reserve a special call out to the local champions of this work that we have had the great fortune of sharing community with and who took time to read and critique this piece. To that end, we extend heartfelt gratitude to Bea Dias, MaryLu Hutchins, and Laura Roop for their love and support of our work and this project.

Resources

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Adultism, Adultification, & Youth-Adult Power Dynamics in Schools

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