



Adultism in Democratic Education

By Adam Fletcher

My child has attended learning environments operating with democratic education principles for the last seven years, and as her dad I believe I'm a partner with her in her learning. As a line-level youth worker, I worked to infuse democratic education principles into my own practice for more than a decade, and as a consultant, I have assisted more than 100 K-12 schools across the US and Canada as they've wrestled with these principles. As a student myself, my bachelors degree is from The Evergreen State College, a widely renowned democratic education institution. For the last several years, I've been an advisor to the Institute for Democratic Education in America, and have worked to help grow this movement nationally in many ways, including presenting several workshops at IDEC and contributing to CC several times. It is from this place of warm interaction, deep investment, and soul-filled appreciation that I share my concerns about adultism in democratic education.

Goals, teaching styles, rules, curriculum, budgeting, building design, behavior expectations... All of these things are determined by adults, for students, throughout schools and

nonprofits. Even in well-meaning democratic learning environments, adultism often runs rampant and unchecked. Like the wildly fast undercurrent of a river that looks slow and smooth on the surface, adultism is deep throughout work done by adults for children and youth.

When they read this, some people will automatically dismiss it as an attempt to cast aspersions on their work. I don't mean to demonize anyone. Instead, I want us to simply acknowledge the basis from which so much of this work operates, including democratic education in all its myriad forms. Understanding this basis can help people attempting to work within democratic education to truly create democratized spaces that are so woefully absent in our society today.

Where Adultism Surfaces in Democratic Education

It is important to recognize that there is no one, single, androgynous form of democratic education that all people everywhere adhere to. If my experience with IDEA has taught me anything, it's that democratic education means many things to many people. Inside of that reality, I don't want people to harbor the sentiment that simply calling something democratic education automatically means it is safe, free, and/or holistic. Just that notion alone makes democratic education adultist, as it reflects an adults' perception of what young people want, rather than asking fully informed, fully invested young people what they want.

In some forms of democratic education, adults create specially isolated spaces for kids to "learn in freedom". This is adultist on many levels. One reason for this is that learning environments that isolate young people from "real world" interactions by creating isolated experiences where young people have the capability to do whatever they want in the name of learning are actually expressing the will of adults. In our society today, we are installed with an inalienable number of rights because of our age. Intending to rectify a perception of diminished rights for youth, there are educators both in schools and outside schools who seek to create rebalance by instilling similar rights in the young people they work with—to an extent.

In a number of gestures, adults in schools and community organizations who adhere to democratic education grant young people the right to voluntary class attendance, voting through class meetings, and in some cases, "all aspects of the school" are led jointly by participants in these meetings. This is A.S. Neill supposedly dismissed early efforts to replicate Summerhill in the U.S., because he thought they were granting license, not freedom. He was wrong; they were granting the right to *self-governance*, not freedom. As William Deresiewicz so powerfully showed, that's a [premise of American democracy](#) that's been lost to the years.

Neill's fetishizing of freedom for children has become the premise for a lot of democratic education today. Unfortunately, as the next [International Democratic Education Conference](#) will inevitably show in August, it is an international movement that's reaching in twenty-nine

directions at once, all without a unifying focus beyond the well-intended adults trying to change the world. Not unlike much of the society many of these activist-educators are working to change, much of the work they do is deeply infused with adultism.

However, the right to self-governance, when applied to children and youth, is wholly adultist, as are *all* forms of governance. Let's be absolutely clear here: Adultism is bias towards adults, and so far as history shows, **no** form of governance has ever been proposed and enacted upon by children or youth. Rather than how many philosophizers and theorizers would define it, adultism *is not* merely discrimination towards youth. Instead, adultism is bias towards adults, and *it is not always wrong*.

In the case of democratic education, adultism informs its very existence. As Neill showed in his refutation mentioned above, revealing the very premise of our understanding of *freedom* is adultist since it was he himself who determined its necessity rather than the young people he worked with themselves. In other democratic education settings this is true, too, as so many program workers, educators, community organizers, and activists form *their* opinions of the world *and then* impose them on young people, calling them democratic education rather than allowing young people to form their own conceptions independent of adults' influence, guidance, leadership, or facilitation. All schools, all nonprofits, all groups, and all movements do this.

The final important distinction to make about adultism in democratic education is regarding the difference between

capacity and capability. *Capacity* is the ability a single person has to understand information, use it in doing something, and foresee the outcomes of that thing. Because of the ways that each person evolves, the boundaries of an individual's personal capacity are largely unknown throughout their life and can only be seen on a person-by-person basis. In an important difference, *capability* is a specific level of skill, knowledge, or ability relative to a task. It is a continuum that is best measured by degrees in order to allow for according, appropriate, and just differentiation between people. In these ways, capacity refers to *what could be*, while capability refers to *what is*.

As the natural world around us routinely reflects, young people are not born with the *capability* to operate in the world around them. However, every child and youth has infinite *capacity* to live according to their own terms. The dilemma is that well-meaning adults throughout our field seem to mix up these two words, capability and capacity. They assume young people are capable of leading themselves whenever, wherever, and however they want to, without working to intentionally increase the capacity of young people to do this. This is a deep expression of adultism, whereupon adults assume that young people have the same capability as them simply because adults have the capacity to do it. This is an unjust assumption at best.

Alternatives to Adultism

In his novel *Turn Coat*, [Jim Butcher](#) explains, “No one is an unjust villain in his own mind. Even - perhaps

even *especially* - those who are the worst of us. Some of the cruelest tyrants in history were motivated by noble ideals, or made choices that they would call 'hard but necessary steps' for the good of their nation. We're all the hero of our own story."

I have found this is true of democratic education too, as with much of society's work with young people in general. The fields of youth development, K-12 education, social services, counseling and therapy, and public health are all littered with heroes like this, people who are unjust villains trying to save the world. I am wholly responsible for this thinking myself, both as a line-level youth worker who held a variety of direct service positions with young people for more than a decade, and as a professional administrator and consultant who has worked in all kinds of organizations across the U.S. and internationally focused on children and youth.

Democratic education, in all its myriad forms, can only be anti-adultist by making young people fully *equal* partners. This means that in addition to the self-governance over educational operations, all children and youth of any age in any space has full ownership over fundraising, the mission, and higher levels of organizational operation through an equal or greater number of full voting positions on boards of directors for the schools and nonprofits that are practicing democratic education. In many states across the United States, those roles are fully against the law for young people to occupy. I am not saying that is right or fair, but that is the way it is. In other situations where young people can legally hold those positions, in organizations ascribing to the values

of democratic education, young people are often thrown into these positions by well-meaning adults without the knowledge and skills (read: *capacity*) to fully contribute. This justifies adults' rationale thinking that says young people have nothing of substance to contribute.

In the face of this discrimination, I have found that it is never good to falsely sooth ourselves into believing we're being anti-adultist. Every adult practices adultism. By confronting the situations and naming what they are, I have found we can successfully challenge them from an informed place of critical awareness instead of a naïve place of self-satisfaction with status quo.

No Alternative to Adultism

From my own position of experience and privilege, I want to propose that *there is no alternative to adultism*. It is *not* one of the Big "Ism"s, like the racism, sexism, and classism. Most people define those "isms" as exaggerated beliefs focused on a group or category of people, and while we popularly refer to adultism this way, *that's not the right framework*. As any bias towards adults, adultism forms a foundation of our social relationships.

There's something askew in the thinking that all adultism anywhere ever is inherently wrong, bad, and eeeeeevil. Nature habituates hierarchical relationships among many species in order to propel evolution forward. Given the absence of adults in their species, many animals simply die, while others live only to procreate. I will not abandon our

young people to their own devices and defenses in the name of personal freedom, if only because I believe that with the rights I enjoy as a human being, there are inherent responsibilities I possess as well. One of them is to raise young people in ways that are just and fair, which is more important than free and unhindered. My adult privilege tells me so, and adultism informs that.



Rather than using adultism incorrectly to describe the discrimination young people face in democratic education, we should use the correct terms to identify why and how this reality is conjured, surfaces, lives, and sustains itself. Words like [ephebiphobia](#), which is the fear of youth; [pediaphobia](#), the fear of children; and [adultcentrism](#), which is the belief that adults are better than young people; these words should be used throughout democratic education, *instead of* or along with adultism, which should only be used to describe bias towards adults. [Paternalism](#), [patriarchy](#), [infantalizing](#), and even [maternalism](#) should be used accordingly, too, as each plays a unique role in democratic learning environments.

The continued usage of adultism without deep examination of its extended parts will actually be detrimental to the growth of democratic education. Using the misunderstood definition or applying it in a blanket way across all discrimination facing young people reflects a lazy, irrelevant analysis that is inconsistent with the goals of what a lot of well-meaning adults say they want through democratic education practices and organizations.

Overcoming Naïveté

The concepts we're looking for, I think, are within grasp. We are on the brink of a social transformation that insists on [youth/adult equity](#) and [social justice for children and youth](#). Democratic education can claim youth/adult partnerships as a cornerstone *right now*, positioning young people in substantive, rich relationships with adults in strategic, intentional, and deliberate ways. Every day, each of us can strive and enact justice with young people in our personal and professional relationships with all young people of every age in all locations we find ourselves.

This naïveté is at the core of democratic education today, and it can be overcome, if we're willing to learn. Understanding that adultism is deep in our work, but not the only thing worth learning, is essential to this fight. I have found that by directly confronting adultcentrism, paternalism, and ephebiphobia I am compelling society towards becoming more just and fair for young people -and- adults; by fighting adultism, I am merely spinning my wheels.

Are you ready to take up arms against semantics and engage in a *real* struggle? It is time we address adultism in democratic education.

About the Author—Adam Fletcher is the founder of The Freechild Project, and an internationally recognized leader in the youth movement. For more than 20 years he has worked locally and internationally, teaching young people and adults how to change the world through youth/adult partnerships. He has written more than 20 publications, 200 articles, and thousands of blog entries related to youth, society, and social change. Adam is available to come to your community or organization and train people on adultism, youth/adult partnerships, youth voice, ephebiphobia, and much more. Learn about him services at adamfletcher.net.

About The Freechild Project—The mission of The Freechild Project is to advocate, inform, and celebrate social change led by and with young people around the world, especially those who have been historically denied the right to participate. We do this by facilitating training and workshops, and through our website. Learn more about us by visiting freechild.org.

Suggested Citation: Fletcher, A. (2013) "Adultism Kills: The Effects of Discrimination Against Children and Youth on Nonprofits". Olympia, WA: The Freechild Project. Retrieved from freechild.org on July 9, 2013.