

MIKROS
DOUNIAS

ADULTISM



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1. Defining adultism

The term “adultism” is composed of the word **adult** and the suffix **-ism**¹ and was introduced in 1978 by the psychologist Jack Flasher (1978: 517). Whereas various “-isms” have been the subject of social movements, political organizations, rich literature and media productions, the concept of adultism is neither well known nor widely accepted as a social reality (Bell 1995).

Adultism stands for **the discrimination of children on the grounds of their young age**². It is a social structure of discrimination, which describes the **imbalance of power between children and adults** (Ritz 2009: 127). The essence of adultism is the differentiated treatment of minors due to judgements based on their age rather than their actual capabilities (Zale 2011; Liebel 2013: 4).

Adultism is based on an understanding of childhood that assumes restricted capabilities and imposes a lower status on minors (Liebel 2013: 4). Both adulthood and childhood are socially constructed phenomena. They were constructed as dichotomies, adulthood being the ideal against which childhood was measured. It is no surprise, therefore, that the latter is considered a lack, a deviation, an imperfection (Johansson 2012: 102).

¹The suffix “-ism” often connotes a system of belief (i.e. Buddhism) or refers to a socially established power system (racism, sexism, ableism, etc.)

²“Adultism” is to be distinguished from “ageism” which stands for the discrimination of elders.

All right, but...

... there are some inherent differences between adults and children.

The theory of adultism does not deny that there can be inherent differences between adults and children – i.e. in anatomy. Discrimination begins when these differences are accompanied by moral judgements against children that lead to treating children as inferior (Murray 2013: 5).

Having studied the expressions of adulthood and childhood in different cultures, Benedict remarks that western culture vastly and massively emphasizes any contrasts that can be traced between adults and children (Qvortrup 2009: 29). According to Fletcher, adultism is a primary assumption of the western society and value system (2013).

...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 protection is used in order to extend children's dependency beyond the necessary measure (Liebel 2013: 11). This does not necessarily happen deliberately; nonetheless, it has serious consequences. (Over)protective behaviors can limit children's chances for agency and decision-making to the point of rendering them helpless and dependent (Liebel 2012:45). Of course, overprotection is unpleasant and time-consuming for adults as well; as Ritz remarks, discrimination is strenuous for all people involved (2008: 13).

A feasible solution is to encourage children's active participation in their protection. Children are competent of—verbally or otherwise—expressing their need for safety and protection. In a similar way, they can express their views on the nature and quality of this protection. Protection that is co-formed by children and adults is more effective, since it is desired and created by its receiver (Liebel 2012: 45); it does

not lead to abuse in the form of adults imposing power upon children, i.e. adultism.

... don't today's children have too much power over adults?

A common resistance expressed by people who encounter the concept of adultism for the first time is that “today's children” tend to “control the family”, have “too much freedom”, are “too spoiled” and “out of control”.

Jesper Juul remarks that, **even when they feel completely powerless, parents continue to have legal, economic, physical and psychical power over their children**³. We believe that statements like the above-mentioned are linked to our adultist mindsets. A less adultist overall approach towards children (for example, taking children seriously, giving them responsibilities that have to do with their lives, communicating our limits as human beings and not as powerful adults) can lead to avoiding such assumptions. Our goal in Mikros Dounias is the equal coexistence of adults and minors, in which every person respects both her personal and the other person's limits.

³ Bell remarks that, except for prisoners and a few other institutionalized groups, 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” (Bell 1995).

2. Institutionalized adultism—adultism in education

Like all forms of discrimination, adultism is not only encountered on an interpersonal but also on an institutional level. Institutionalized adultism has negative impacts on children's daily lives and results in oppressive social relations (Le François 2014: 47). Simultaneously, it serves as a mechanism that "leverages, perpetuates and instills" adultism throughout society (Liebel 2013: 5).

Firstly, we can discuss a general lack of intergenerational justice. The **legal status** of adults and minors is different in almost all respects: economic, social, cultural, civil and political rights. Moreover, minors' access to rights, goods, services and institutions is significantly limited when compared to that of adults (Liebel 2012: 97; 2013: 5, 13). Another issue is that of legally fixed age limits; they are generally perceived as "natural" and self-evident, yet their effectiveness and arbitrariness can be questioned.

Furthermore, **the participation of minors in political life is very limited**. It is often believed that children do not have any interest for politics; Haug explains that children are simply not interested in what adults define as politics (2011: 29). Within the existing political system, the fact that minors are excluded from the right to vote not only proves their extremely low socio-political clout (Le François 2014: 48), but also generates a scarce political interest about their needs and requests. Moreover, decision-making is a privilege reserved for adults; children are not consulted there, whereas adults would be⁴ (Liebel 2013: 12). Even decisions that directly impact children's lives are made in courts, schools, family councils or other spheres; that is why they are often

⁴ As Liebel aptly remarks, "the participation of children, where it is thought of at all, is limited to 'children's affairs' and is seen as a sort of playground to practice and prepare for adulthood" (2012: 45).

based on generalized, stereotyped images about children and do not correspond to their actual needs and desires.

Proceeding to the crucial matter, “adultism and education”, it is worth mentioning that many sources view school as an inherently and historically adultist institution, which is based on institutionalized adultism and perpetuates adultism (i.e. NCBI 2004: 57, Zale 2011: 1). In fact, adults define by law how minors spend their daily life over many years. Through this, they dictate to children a rational way of living (Lingg 2013: 17) and segregate them from the rest of the society (Fletcher 2013).

Holt believes that children should have the right to decide if, when, how, and from whom they want to learn (1989: 233); according to Montessori, children want to learn concrete things at specific times rather than at arbitrary times (Fthenakis 2007: 19). Reality is different: Children are often forced to sit down and listen to a teacher, sentenced to an “inferior’s silence” (Pappa 2004), which they can suspend only by asking for permission. Frontal instruction almost automatically turns the teacher into an authority, whose claims are deemed valid without question; this format prevents a mutually respectful and productive exchange where adults can learn from the children as well.

In order to treat children fairly, a society needs to value them for what they are now, not as future adults (Farson 1980: 10). In greek reality, the participation of children in the elaboration of the official, mandatory curriculum is not foreseen⁵(!). This leads to educational content that does not correspond to children’s present needs and interests, but rather content that tries to estimate what a “successful professional and citizen of the future” would need. Education ends up viewing

⁵ In Reggio Emilia pedagogy, no curricula or standards direct what should be learnt, since this would lead to lessons where nothing is learnt (Fthenakis, 2007: 27).

children as incomplete, half “becomings” that will turn into “beings” with the acquaintance of majority of age (Korczak 2011: 27).

Additionally, if children were in charge of their own education, they would not assign excessive value to the linguistic and mathematical-logical intelligences, while neglecting the kinesthetic, musical, naturalistic, interpersonal, intrapersonal and spatial intelligences (see Gardner’s theory of multiple intelligences in Davis et al. 2011: 2).

Closing this section, we would like to name three interconnected procedures that are quite dominant within the current educational system: evaluation, reward and punishment. Except for the fact that they are one-sided (children never officially get a chance to evaluate, reward or punish their teachers), these mechanisms can alienate children from their inherent motives and teach them that the primary value of learning is to fulfill adults’ expectations.

3. Effects of adultism

- **Internalization of adultism**

Internalization occurs when the dominant group's ideology is adopted by its victims, who accept their inferior status as natural, deserved and inevitable.

Adultism is internalized when children...

...assimilate the adultist behaviors they have experienced and stop perceiving them as unjustified (Lingg, 2012: 6).

...are persuaded of their low value, reliance and competence and learn to view themselves as irresponsible, incompetent, inexperienced, foolish and mediocre (Holt, 1989: 82).

...adopt adults' opinions about them, although they initially feel or felt differently (Ritz, 2009: 137).

...stop taking themselves and their peers seriously (NCBI 2004: 10).

Yet, taking oneself seriously leads to being taken seriously (NCBI 2004: 12). It is nothing but a vicious circle: The feelings of powerlessness, worthlessness and reduced self-confidence caused by internalized adultism influence children's behavior, persistence, daring and capabilities (Bell 1995).

- **Laying the foundations for every form of discrimination**

Why do people tend to permit, accept and exert discrimination? Because of adultism, claims Ritz (2009: 127). Can we claim that adultism sets solid foundations for every form of discrimination? This standpoint can be supported by the arguments illustrated below.

Adultism is the first form of discrimination that any person experiences. In a period of life, during which learning is mostly absorbed unconsciously, children experience the sensations of power, lack of power and misuse of power (Ritz, 2008: 13; 2009: 141). In essence, people who love them and those they love show them that discrimination and oppression are acceptable⁶ (NCBI, 2004: 12). This constitutes a fertile ground for the cultivation of different forms of discrimination.

Adultism is the only form of discrimination to be experienced by every human being – no matter what the degree or the cultural variation of this experience might be (Bell, 1995). As Alanen points out, the social world is not only gendered, classed, raced, etc., but also “generationed” (2009: 162). According to her, 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: 162; Haug 2011: 26).

Moreover, the internalization of adultism activates a mechanism that applies to all forms of discrimination, as all forms of discrimination are based upon a similar pattern (Ritz, 2009: 141): the mechanism of

⁶ According to Alice Miller, many children are humiliated and demeaned by their parents, and at the same time ordered to respect them, love them and hide their suffering. Most parents expect this from their children. However, something similar would be expected of an adult only in the frame of obviously sadomasochistic relations (Miller 2002: 142-169).

passing on the violence to weaker creatures. According to Flasher, the principal victims of children that have experienced adultism are younger children, children that are less powerful physically or intellectually, and children whose parents have a lower social status (1978: 522). Alice Miller explains that, when a weaker child shows up, children have the chance to pass on the humiliation by exerting power themselves: “As long as there are even weaker, more helpless creatures than they, they are not the lowest slaves” (2002: 142-169).

A factor that differentiates adultism from other forms of discrimination is the following: Childhood displays almost absolute mobility towards adulthood, which gives the opportunity to every victim of discrimination to later exercise discrimination on the same grounds⁷ (Qvortrup, 2009: 28; Ritz, 2009: 141). Bell claims that, as new opportunities or forms of discrimination are introduced in the course of a person’s life, the patterns of discrimination are already installed. This significantly raises the chances that one accepts these new impulses as physical or “normal”; a person might continue tolerating discrimination on different grounds and/or reenact their experience upon less powerful creatures (1995).

To conclude, by introducing the experience of discrimination very early during one’s life, adultism facilitates the tolerance and exercise of other forms of discrimination. It becomes the fundamental “-ism”, which sets stable foundations for every other “-ism” (NCBI 2004: 12).

⁷ In an official discussion on equality and anti-discrimination, a boy observed that prejudice against children is much more extreme than other forms of discrimination. According to him, other forms of discrimination could have an explanation: One could say “Oh, I don’t like the Welsh” or “I don’t like Buddhists”, because one has probably never met and talked to one. What the boy could not explain is how someone who has been a child himself can have so negative stereotypes about children (Garnelas 2007: 25).

4. What do we do in Mikros Dounias about adultism?

Not judging or separating children according to their age

The question “How old are you?” is possibly the first question that an adult asks a child when they meet for the first time. The answer received leads us to the respective “age box” in our minds: *How should I treat a three-year-old child? What is a six-year-old capable of doing?* The projection of our personal and social expectations upon the child happens almost automatically (Woodhead, 2009: 51).

We do not condemn the theories of cognitive development, yet we do not believe that associating a child’s age with his or her capabilities is inevitable or “normal” (Woodhead, 2009: 51). Far more important is not to neglect the uniqueness of every human being (Ritz, 2008: 9).

In this context, the children of Mikros Dounias, whose ages vary from two to five years old, spend their days all together and not in age-based groups. We have observed that their interactions are not significantly influenced by the factor of “age” and that they constantly learn from one another, naturally implementing the concept of peer learning. We adults try to consciously facilitate this procedure. For example, when a child asks us for some help or information that another child could provide them with, we encourage him/her to address his/her peer.

How we interact with children

- **We only touch a child when we are sure of having his/her consent at this very moment.** We recognize that we do not have the right to step into his vital space without his consent; we put effort into recognizing and respecting the distance that he chooses to keep from us (Holt, 1989: 94,99). Instead of taking a child's hand in ours, we propose our hand to her and/or ask her if she wants to hold it. Instead of hugging a child, we open our hug, so that she gets the chance to decide if she wants to enter.
- Before talking to a child, we take a moment to observe what she is doing. **We do not interrupt** her activity, which we perceive as important⁸, unless necessary.
- **We do not ignore** the children that pursue our attention. If we cannot interact with a child at the specific moment, we take a moment to explain ourselves. We do not consider our communication with a child less important than our communication with an adult⁹.
- **We are constantly looking for suitable ways to communicate, verbally or otherwise, with each child.** Research shows that even very young people are capable of expressing their views when enough effort is put into choosing appropriate ways of communicating with them (Murray, 2013: 11). Children are often considered incapable of understanding or discussing, yet much of the time their failure to follow adults' words is not due to the complexity of the information, but rather to the inept way of its

⁸ Adults need to stop considering children's activities inferior to their own "serious" activities. "Play" is not less important than "work" (Wright, 1998); actually, it could be considered the work that children do (Ritz, 2008: 6).

⁹ Wright observes that when parents drop off their children in kindergarten, they greet other adults, but totally ignore the children that are present in the setting (1998).

transmission (Ritz 2008: 8). Our efforts in this direction are usually rewarded.

- Adults tend to withhold information from children, misinform them, or manipulate them with fake justifications, which they consider more easy or less painful. In Mikros Dounias, we consistently try to accompany the children in their difficult mission of understanding reality. **This keeps us away from disorientating and oversimplifying speech.** Moreover, we consider them capable of judging for themselves which pieces of information are relevant, useful or interesting for them.
- We wonder what makes us alter the tone of our voice when addressing young children. **We choose not to adopt a childish, “baby” voice.**
- **We avoid using diminutives** when we speak to, or about kids.
- **We pay attention that our formulations** do not reproduce adultism: “You will understand when you grow up”; “These are not children’s issues”; “Your sister behaves like that because she is young”; etc. A conscious choice of the words we use can displace the attention from the factor of age and uncover the actual causes of a situation.
- **We do not use adjectives to characterize children** (beautiful, smart, aggressive etc.).
- **We are skeptical about evaluation, reward and any form of punishment.**

How we perceive children

- **We believe in children.** We focus on what they can do and not on what they cannot do (Liebel, 2012b: 103). For us, children are presumed capable, not presumed incapable.
- **We trust children.** According to Ritz, adults tend to show little trust in children’s feelings and instincts regarding their own bodies and

needs (2008: 9). Children are capable of accurately recognizing and communicating their needs since the first day of their lives. Our role, as adults, is not to anticipate or decide on children's needs, but rather to support them in fulfilling them.

- **We systematically support children in pursuing their autonomy**, which we consider the most direct way to liberation and freedom. The latter is linked to skills that might seem insignificant through our adult eyes: Can a child get dressed and wear her shoes by herself; can she go to the toilet independently; can she find her water bottle and be responsible for her bag? After patiently supporting children in acquiring these skills, we abstain from instructing or assisting them in these specific tasks. We feel that in this way, we would not be “facilitating” the children but rather ourselves or the daily program.
- **We share with children responsibilities that concern the community**, such as setting the table, transferring and preparing our common snack, filling up the water bottles, squeezing the orange juice, dishwashing, tidying up, cleaning etc. We have observed that children are not only capable of undertaking responsibilities, but also happy to do so.
- **We do not intervene in children's conflicts, unless we feel it is absolutely necessary**. The resolution of a conflict without adult intervention is far more meaningful and can often be less complicated. **Our role as adults is to supply children with tools that allow them to solve their conflicts on their own**, such as the ones described below:
 - ★ Whoever is experiencing pressure can use the word “stop”, which indicates that a line has been crossed, something is perceived as unpleasant, or an action has stopped being funny or tolerable. The “stop” word is used and respected by all children, no matter which their mother language. This significantly diminishes the need for adult intervention.

- ★ Hourglasses and simple-to-use timers can be found in Mikros Dounias. When more than one child wishes to play with something that is only suitable for one person, they use an hourglass to arrange how to take turns on their own.
- ★ And who is going to play first? When children disagree on that, luck can determine the outcome. They can sing a song or say a phrase, and point to a different person with each syllable. When the song finishes, the person who is being pointed at may play first.
- However, **if we feel that any type of violence is escalating and that we need to intervene, we make sure that we do so with respect.** First of all, only one adult approaches the children; she needs to be calm and neutral. If she needs to physically separate the children, she does it gently and by using as little physical power as possible. At this point, a hug can be useful, though we never forget the necessity of the children's consent! When the tension is diminished, the adult and the children can talk about the incident and about each person's motives. The adult does not offer a ready-made solution; she discreetly supports the children in discovering and applying their own solutions.

On time

The use, perception and management of time is directly linked to self-regulation, to autonomy, to power. Children often do not have input in the programming or time management of their family or school. We are proud to be implementing a different model.

A typical day in Mikros Dounias offers plenty of time for free play. We observe that, as the months go by, children get increasingly confident in managing their own time. Their need and desire for adult support in this diminishes.

At the same time, our day contains routines, which offer a feeling of safety and stability, uniting our community. The children's participation in routines and activities is optional. Examples include:

- Three circles take place every day: the morning circle, the snack circle and the goodbye circle. Not participating in a circle means some spatial restriction for a child: we ask him to stay close to the circle so that he can see us and we can see him. This way, we can avoid restricting the child's time.
- Our weekly program includes some "offers", i.e. music and art. In order to ensure that the children can abstain from the offers or "opt out" during them, an adult always accompanies free play while they take place.
- We have observed that, once the members of our community get used to a routine, a respectful "culture" is established. The result is that almost every child participates in the circles on a daily basis. Participation in the optional offers varies from day to day and from child to child.

Warning the children in advance for every upcoming change has also proven to be very important for the life in Mikros Dounias (and, generally, for the coexistence with children). **When a shift in the program approaches, i.e. when snack time is near, we make sure that we warn children once or twice in advance (e.g., 15 and then 5 minutes before snack).** This way, they have enough time to decide what they want to do or prepare themselves for the upcoming change.

On space & materials

Discrimination against children (and, of course, not only children) is reproduced daily by the dominant architecture. The biggest part of the constructed world is made for (able) adults, depriving children from access and free movement.

The interior spaces of Mikros Dounias allow children to fulfill their daily needs and desires independently. We cautiously observe children's spatial preferences and habits, ask them for their opinions, and re-adjust the environment with them or according to them on a regular basis. Parents, educators and children are responsible for keeping the spaces clean and tidy. We have agreed to remove our shoes before entering the interior spaces, so that we can lie on the carpets and the pillows.

Books, toys and materials are placed at children's height. There are not many materials, so as not to disorientate or overstimulate children. Their contents do not reproduce stereotypes or discriminatory behaviours. Moreover, we mostly choose self-corrected materials, so that children's occupation and feeling of achievement does not depend on adults. Individual trays allow children to indicate their personal working space, which is useful when they want to create or do something on their own.

Yet the most important of all seems to be our constant ability to be out in nature. Each child can choose at all times if she wants to be inside the yurt or outside, in the little forest of Mikros Dounias. "Bad" weather is not a barrier, since every child has his own wellies, rainproof suit and waterproof winter suit. We have observed that most children choose to spend much more time in nature, and that they are much calmer when being there.

Keeping up the effort & the discussion

One **simple tool** that we use to detect adultism in our behavior is the question: *“Would I treat an adult in the same way?”* or *“Would an adult receive the same treatment under similar conditions?”* For example, a child is asked what his name is and, after some seconds of silence, his mother says his name—would she do the same, if a friend of hers had been asked the same and took her time? Alternatively, we can ask the question *“Why is a child treated this way?”* The answer *“Because he/she is a child”* can be a sign of adultism (Murray, 2013: 15).

In Mikros Dounias, parents and pedagogues constantly build up close trusting relationships. This allows us to be open towards and alert to detecting adultist behaviour in ourselves and our community; it also encourages us to discuss them, so that we can notice them and act differently in the future. It is about a continuous work-in-progress!

Furthermore, we recognize that adultism is deeply rooted inside us and that we are actually attempting to question every intergenerational experience we have had so far. This mechanism cannot change automatically; there is no reason to feel guilty about our behaviors. If we behave in an adultist way, there is the chance to correct our behaviour afterwards, for example by discussing or apologizing to the child. We support each other in this continuous effort towards a very crucial, collective goal.

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About us

[Mikros Dounias](#) is an educational project on the greek island of Lesvos. Every day, local and refugee children of early childhood age play and learn together in the small forest of PIKPA refugee camp, run with the contribution of the organization "[Lesvos Solidarity](#)". We, the pedagogues, parents, and children of Mikros Dounias, organize our learning processes collectively, beyond any form of discrimination. We respect the rhythm, the needs and the desires of each person by encouraging freedom of choice and self-regulation. Outdoor learning brings us closer to the creatures and the elements of nature, reinforcing our relations to ourselves and everything around us.



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