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can school become a non-adultist institution?

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abstract

To answer the question of whether school can become a non-adultist institution, this article examines the unequal adult-child (teacher-pupil) power relations that characterize school under the framework of bourgeois-capitalist society and that are upheld by certain functions, methods, norms and knowledge standards. Under the influence of the anti-authoritarian youth protest movements from the 1960s onwards, overt power in school (e.g. by means of corporal punishment) has been criticized and, in most countries, abolished. However, power imbalances between teachers and pupils have not disappeared, but rather developed towards a more subtle, covert power, e.g. by framing certain expectations. The hierarchical top-down and one-way learning principles of school institutions are mostly left uncontested. This article does not content itself with simply stating that schools repeatedly reproduce adultism under these societal conditions, but also discusses possible strategies and interventions that could shift unequal power relations and ultimately overturn them. It looks at various concepts and alternative forms of education critical of adultism that have emerged since the beginning of the 20th century both within and outside the state school system. It further explores the contradictions that should be expected to arise in their implementation within the framework of existing educational institutions. Particular attention is paid to the respective possibilities for action on the part of teachers and pupils. We offer a decisive challenge to teachers to rethink how they deal with their power, which is always derived and fragile, and how they can contribute to pupils empowering themselves and significantly influence learning and decision-making processes at school.

keywords: adultism; school; power relations; alternative education; empowerment.

¿puede la escuela volverse una institución no adultista?

resumen

Para responder a la pregunta de si la escuela puede volverse una institución no adultista, este artículo examina las desiguales relaciones de poder entre adultos y niños (profesores-alumnos) que caracterizan a la escuela en el marco de la sociedad burguesa-capitalista y que se sustentan en ciertas funciones, métodos, normas y parámetros de conocimiento. Bajo la influencia de los movimientos de protesta juvenil antiautoritarios a partir de los años 60, el poder manifiesto en la escuela (por ejemplo, mediante castigos corporales) ha sido criticado y, en la mayoría de los países, abolido. Sin embargo, los desequilibrios de poder entre profesores y alumnos no han desaparecido, sino que han evolucionado hacia un poder más sutil y encubierto, por ejemplo, mediante

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la formulación de determinadas expectativas. Los principios jerárquicos de aprendizaje descendente y unidireccional de las instituciones escolares se mantienen mayormente sin discusión. Este artículo no se contenta con simplemente afirmar que las escuelas reproducen repetidamente el adultismo en estas condiciones sociales, sino que también examina posibles estrategias e intervenciones que podrían cambiar las relaciones de poder desiguales y, en última instancia, revocarlas. Examina diversos conceptos y formas alternativas de educación crítica hacia el adultismo que han surgido desde principios del siglo XX tanto dentro como fuera del sistema escolar estatal. Además, explora las contradicciones que cabe esperar que surjan en su implementación en el marco de las instituciones educativas existentes. Se presta especial atención a las respectivas posibilidades de acción por parte de profesores y alumnos. Desafiamos decisivamente a los profesores para que se replanteen cómo manejan su poder, que siempre es derivado y frágil, y cómo pueden contribuir a que los alumnos se empoderen e influyan significativamente en los procesos de aprendizaje y toma de decisiones en la escuela.

palabras clave: adultismo; escuela; relaciones de poder; educación alternativa; empoderamiento.

kann schule zu einer nicht-adultistischen institution werden?

zusammenfassung

Zur Beantwortung der Frage, ob die Schule zu einer nicht-adultistischen Institution werden kann, untersucht der Artikel die ungleichen Machtverhältnisse zwischen Erwachsenen und Kindern (Lehrer*innen und Schüler*innen), die die Schule im Rahmen der bürgerlich-kapitalistischen Gesellschaft kennzeichnen und die mit der Aufrechterhaltung bestimmter Funktionen, Methoden, Normen und Wissensstandards verbunden sind. Unter dem Einfluss der antiautoritären Jugendprotestbewegungen ab den 1960er Jahren wurde die offene Macht in der Schule (z.B. durch körperliche Züchtigung) kritisiert und in den meisten Ländern abgeschafft. Die Machtungleichgewichte zwischen Lehrer*innen und Schüler*innen sind jedoch nicht verschwunden, sondern haben sich zu einer subtileren, verdeckten Macht entwickelt, z. B. durch die Formulierung bestimmter Erwartungen. Die hierarchischen, von oben nach unten gerichteten und eingleisigen Lernprinzipien der Schulinstitutionen bleiben weitgehend unangetastet. Dieser Artikel begnügt sich nicht mit der Feststellung, dass Schule unter diesen gesellschaftlichen Bedingungen immer wieder Adultismus reproduziert, sondern diskutiert mögliche Strategien und Interventionen, die ungleiche Machtverhältnisse verschieben und letztlich außer Kraft setzen könnten. Er nimmt verschiedene Konzepte und alternative, adultismuskritische Bildungsformen unter die Lupe, die seit Beginn des 20. Jahrhunderts innerhalb und außerhalb des staatlichen Schulsystems entstanden sind. Des Weiteren werden die Widersprüche, die bei ihrer Umsetzung im Rahmen der bestehenden Bildungsinstitutionen entstehen und zu erwarten sind, untersucht. Besonderes Augenmerk wird dabei auf die jeweiligen Handlungsmöglichkeiten von Lehrer*innen und Schüler*innen gelegt. Eine entscheidende Herausforderung wird darin gesehen, wie Lehrer*innen ihre Macht, die immer eine abgeleitete und fragile Macht ist, überdenken und wie sie dazu beitragen können, dass Schüler*innen sich selbst ermächtigen und die Lern- und Entscheidungsprozesse in der Schule maßgeblich beeinflussen können.

schlüsselwörter: adultismus; schule; machverhältnisse; alternative bildung; empowerment.

pode a escola se tornar uma instituição não-adultista?

resumo

Para responder a questão sobre a possibilidade da escola se tornar uma instituição não adultista, o artigo examina as relações de poder desiguais entre adultos e crianças (professor-aluno) que caracterizam a escola no contexto de uma sociedade burguesa-capitalista e que são sustentadas por certas funções, métodos, normas e padrões de conhecimento. Sob a influência dos movimentos de protestos juvenis anti-autoritários a partir de 1960, o poder evidente nas escolas (no sentido de castigos físicos) foi criticado e, na maioria dos países, abolido. No entanto, o desequilíbrio de poder entre professores e alunos não desapareceu, mas evoluiu para um poder mais sutil e velado, como por exemplo, mediante a formulação de determinadas expectativas. Os princípios de aprendizagem hierárquica, de cima para baixo e unidirecionais das instituições escolares são, na sua maioria, mantidos sem questionamentos. Este artigo não se limita a afirmar que as escolas reproduzem repetidamente o adultismo nessas condições sociais, mas também discute as possíveis estratégias e intervenções que poderiam alterar as relações de poder desiguais e, em última análise, anulá-las. São discutidos vários conceitos e formas alternativas de educação crítica ao adultismo que têm surgido desde o começo do século 20, dentro e fora do sistema escolar público. Além disso, são exploradas as contradições que surgem e que devem ser esperadas na sua implementação no âmbito das instituições educacionais existentes. É dada especial atenção às respectivas possibilidades de ação por parte dos professores e dos alunos. Um desafio decisivo é a forma como os professores repensam seu poder, que é sempre um poder derivado e frágil, e como podem contribuir para que os alunos se empoderem e influenciem significativamente os processos de aprendizagem e de tomada de decisões na escola.

palavras-chave: adultismo; escola; relações de poder; educação alternativa; empoderamento.

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"The worst time is the night before the exam. I sleep very restlessly and dream of good grades, but very often of bad grades, which means: I'm fighting for life and death with the grades, so to speak! At night, the grades assault me, I can't do anything about it"
(Jürgen Herz, 12 years old, in: Zimmermann & Eigel, 1980, p. 11).

introduction

In this article, we examine dominant educational approaches within school structures of bourgeois-capitalist societies and seek ways to reduce adultism in schools and also non-adultist alternatives to schools. For this purpose, it is necessary to trace the partly overt, partly covert power relations that still characterize schools in capitalist social formations and are upheld by certain functions, methods, norms and knowledge standards. Our critical theoretical perspective questions the common practices of schooling and explores alternative strategies and interventions that could shift and ultimately overturn unequal power relations. This applies in particular when working with pupils who are socially disadvantaged, marginalized or discriminated against. Following intersectional thought, adultism is never a stand-alone axis of discrimination, but must always be considered in conjunction with other bases of discrimination such as class, racism, sexism and ableism (see Liebel & Meade, 2024).

In this article, we look at the history and functions of today's school as a modern institution that structurally favors and reproduces adultism. We explain how this has evolved within bourgeois-capitalist society by advancing methods of control while at the same time maintaining school's capitalist bias. We then ask whether alternative pedagogical concepts can avoid or even counter adultism and contribute to learning in a non-adultist way. Here we distinguish between educational ideas, practices and concepts developed outside the established state school system and those which can be used by teachers from within the system, e.g. in the sense of critical adulthood and to empower pupils.

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the structural basis of adultism in today's schools

In patriarchal nuclear families, adultism is prevalent (Liebel & Meade 2023: p. 64–76), but it is the institutionalized educational system that consolidates the socialization of children to accept the inevitability of hierarchy and inequality between adults and children. Parents and guardians play a significant role in subjecting their children to school and making them functional and successful there, e.g. by praising good grades and discouraging bad ones. In many cases, they act as accomplices to teachers and educational assistants, who steer young people in a certain direction by establishing desired and undesired patterns for behavior. Within the school, adultism is in turn inscribed in the unequal power relationship between teachers and learners, the pupils, which is enabled by the school's compulsory character. School, however, must necessarily expand and refine its power techniques in comparison to the nuclear family, since it exists outside the private sphere, and young people are not dependent on it in biological, emotional and economic terms. Adults in school, therefore, by virtue of their office, are endowed with privileges over young people who, as *pupils* or collectively as a *class*, are assigned the function of learning from them and thus becoming functional adults themselves. In bourgeois-capitalist societies, pupils' function is seen as existing not in the present, but rather as future workers and as human capital (Qvortrup, 2001; 2009). Since capitalist ideology permeates all of society, including its institutions, schools are no exception. The capitalist mode of production is dependent on competition, merit and workers' subjugation to bosses, managers and CEOs. Corresponding education systems level the path for this ideology and are important for regional competitiveness in their respective countries. Philosopher Louis Pierre Althusser therefore saw the main function of the educational system in operating as an *ideological state apparatus*, controlling peoples' values and beliefs (see Ruuska, 2023). Subsequently, it works in the interest of the bourgeoisie and reproduces class inequality.

In a study of power relations in schools based in part on the power analyses of philosopher Michel Foucault ([1966]1970; 1978; 1982), a former student of Althusser, the educational scientist Eva-Maria Rottlaender points out that

the current shape of the school system and, above all, the prevailing power and disciplinary structure, can only be understood against the background of its history. In other words, it is important to show which historically evolved modes of operation and convictions have proven to be particularly central and effective, so that they are still a constitutive element of the idea of school today (Rottlaender, 2018, p. 122).

Viewing the history of education, especially schools, publicist Katharina Rutschky ([1977]1997) describes their task, under the catchword “*poisonous pedagogy*,”³ as an attempt to get a grip on the assumed conflict between nature and reason and to “civilize” young people in this way. Children are seen as wild and unreasonable; they need to be tempered and guided onto the right path by the education and discipline of adults. From a political perspective, the civilizing process is, among other things, related to the fact that a “people” is easier to govern to the extent that it is more predictable and homogeneous, in short: “normalized” (see Link, 2018).

school as a tool for civilization

The meaning and purpose of schools have changed several times over the course of history. Parallel to the establishment of centralized nation states in the 19th century, schools were freed from their ecclesiastical dominance and secularized in the spirit of enlightened absolutism (Maynes, 1985, p. 7–32). The now institutionalized and nationalized school took on the civilizing task of educating the “people” to become well-behaved citizens. They were trained to do certain things competently in a certain amount of time in technically and militarily organized administrative units, because that is how most people worked. Several approaches to reforming state school institutions were not successful because the state could not make use of so many critical thinkers. In this sense, the focus of “poisonous pedagogy” was to break the stubbornness of the child.⁴

³ From a racism-critical perspective, the term Rutschky originally used in German, “Schwarze Pädagogik” (*black pedagogy*), is problematic.

⁴ The psychoanalyst Alice Miller took up these ideas in her books *Prisoners of Childhood* (Miller, 1981), *The Truth Will Set You Free* (Miller, 2001) and *You Shall Not Be Aware* (Miller, 1998) and illustrated some of them using exemplary life stories. In the film *Who's Afraid of Alice Miller?* (Howald, 2020), Alice Miller's son, who had previously written an autobiographical book in which he fiercely criticized his mother's emotionally cold upbringing (Miller, 2018), explores her life story as a persecuted Jew and comes to a conciliatory conclusion.

Foucault attributed the emergence of the school as an anonymous system of power to the efforts of the European Enlightenment to make nature, and therefore also human beings, plannable and controllable. According to Foucault, power only exists because differences between people exist or are constructed. This means that power does not exist as something absolute, but only in relationships, actions and language between people (see Foucault, 1982). It can be identified, for example, by hierarchies between people who move in a certain way in a certain space. It also manifests itself via the spatial isolation of institutionalized education from the outside world. The mastery of children's powers and the establishment of peace and order were and are the central tasks of teachers, as this is the only way to guarantee the educational effect of lessons as a compulsory event separate from life.

The school as an institution of adultist practices is explained not least by the fact that it is closely linked to the development of a phase of childhood and adolescence that is separate from adult life and to which special characteristics are attributed. The school as a separate (learning) space from the adult world not only symbolizes this separation, but also brings it about. According to the publicist Ulrike Heider (1984, p. 11), the "subcultural separation of the subpopulations of childhood and youth is accompanied by the artificial division of human characteristics no longer into male and female as previously, but now also into adult and child-adolescent". Following the pattern of the colonization of "foreign" continents and societies taking place at the same time, children and adolescents are constructed as pre-civilized individuals who are to be transformed into civilized adults by means of school (see Liebel, 2020; Bañales, 2024).

This process culminated "in the perfect planning and control of everyday school life" (Heider 1984, p. 28), resulting in the "banishment of children and adolescents into a semi-colonial subculture" (ibid., p. 27). It is obvious that the banishment of children, similar to the colonization of people outside of Europe, is still associated with the fear that their pre-civilized savagery could break free. This anxiety is ubiquitous because the desired civilizing outcome has to be produced all over again with every child. For this reason, characteristics of the uncivilized



individual that are seen as dangerous “are only conceded to children and adolescents for the period before the completion of their individual civilization under the condition of their simultaneous association with weakness and infantilism” (ibid., p. 39).

We also see this as a reason why, from the teacher’s point of view, the classroom appears to be a potential site of chaos that gets out of hand when the sense of control is lost. Objects could then fly around, subversive information could be exchanged, jokes could be made, grimaces could be pulled, laughter could ensue, the noise level could rise and break out like a sudden storm. A deep-seated fear of disorder, of what has not yet been tamed, arises in the teacher. It is combined with the ideology that children are actually savages and barbarians, chaotic individuals who climb up on their desks at every opportunity like monkeys climb on trees.⁵ A constitutive element of the school is therefore the permanent visibility of the pupils, which is usually accomplished by the seating arrangement. The teacher directs what happens. Pupils’ behavior is constantly monitored and corrected if the rules aren’t followed.

bourgeois-capitalist functions of school

As stated above, school prepares children for the world of work by instilling values and skills that employers prioritize. Pupils are therefore disciplined based on the capitalist principles of *selection* and *competition*, for example through assigned tasks which they must complete within an allotted time. Schools motivate their pupils by means of external rewards – mostly grades – which correspond to wages later on in their work lives. In addition, the linkage between home and school ensures further discipline: regular reports and assessments are written and sent to parents. In order to avoid being shamed, condemned or even punished again by the parents, there is increased pressure on the pupils to ensure that these assessments and reports are positive. The permanent grading of

⁵ In his major work *The Social System*, sociologist Talcott Parsons speaks of a “barbaric invasion of the stream of newborn children”, which must be tamed through “socialization” at school (Parsons, [1951]1991, p. 143). At the beginning of the 20th century, his colleague Émile Durkheim compared children to “primitive mankind”. Their “volatile character” corresponds to that of the “savages”. In order not to jeopardize the cohesion of civilized society, they had to be subjected to an “imperative” moral education in “discipline” and “self-control” at school (Durkheim, 1934).

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“performance” creates a ranking among the pupils in a class, which puts the pupils in competition with each other instead of encouraging them to solve tasks and problems together and to learn *from each other* (as in “cooperative learning”).

Interestingly, research findings indicate that *actual* competence can hardly be assessed properly. Instead, it is predominantly the *prediction* of perceived competence that is incorporated into an assessment, i.e. what is already assumed in advance by the person making the assessment (Schlenker & Leary, 1982). This is particularly discriminatory when stereotypes influence this prediction, e.g. when it is assumed that girls have a lack of technical knowledge or that children from immigrant families are likely to become drop-outs. In the institution of school, this has the effect of a self-fulfilling prophecy. Further processes of exclusion, stigmatization and hierarchization of pupils take place (often unconsciously) through *othering*⁶ based on characteristics such as deviant behavior, skin color, origin, religious affiliation, sexual orientation, social class or disability (see Riegel, 2016). These mechanisms serve not least to maintain a complex order of privileges and subjugations and ensure control (see Kollender, 2021).

Despite many reforms, schools perpetuate a system of unequal opportunities due to the causal link between social background and the achievement of the qualifications required to finish school. Even though the officially declared aim of schools is to eliminate this inequality by installing a meritocracy, they instead continue to systematically produce pupils who drop out or are illiterate (see Klemm, 2009). The widespread idea of equality of opportunity in school remains a fallacy. Numerous studies worldwide repeatedly prove that the relationship between educational achievement and socioeconomic status is enduring and substantial. Although the size of the effect varies across studies, PISA data shows little change over the years in this relationship (Thomson, 2018, p. 2).

To explain why school reforms seldom change institutional power relations, we have to recognize that educational institutions are deeply embedded in capitalist social formations. On the one hand, their custodial function enables

⁶ Through means of *othering*, supposed characteristics of groups of people are constructed in order to impute inferiority and inferiority to “non-belongers” or “strangers”.



parents to take on work outside the family sphere (the problematic absence of which recently attracted attention during the pandemic lockdowns). According to the educational political economist Freerk Huiskens, schools, on the other hand, aim to pre-sort pupils (the future workforce) according to the hierarchy of the labor market. In capitalism, only a few high school graduates are actually required, but enough “material” for the low-wage sector and the industrial reserve army is essential. The failing of a large proportion of pupils and their premature exclusion from higher education is a fundamental function of the education system (Huiskens, 2016). Schools achieve this selection by implementing an adultist teacher-student relationship and herewith organizing lessons as competitive events. Learning performance is not measured individually, but always in comparison to other classmates, who are perceived as competitors and, to a limited extent, as potential opponents. Students’ failure is attributed to alleged laziness, stupidity or immaturity and thus individualized. Ideologically, this systematic discrimination is cloaked in a specific idea of social justice: inequality between people is considered just if the better-off person has gained an advantage in a supposedly equitable competition, a basic principle of the capitalist labor market. This, too, is a fallacy: There is no equality of opportunity – neither for the pupils, nor for workers.

new forms of exercising power at school

Much has changed in schools since the 1960s as a result of the influence of the anti-authoritarian youth protest movements. Around a third of all countries worldwide have banned corporal punishment in public schools since the end of the 20th century, and later most private schools followed suit (Gershoff, 2017).⁷ In most countries, there is now compulsory schooling or compulsory teaching, which also includes alternative forms of education and home schooling. In the education plans of almost all countries today, the maturity of the individual is formulated as a goal. The forms of communication between teachers and pupils have partially

⁷ When we talk about violence in schools today, the focus is usually on violence between pupils, e.g. cyberbullying. However, direct violence by teachers has by no means disappeared, despite the legal bans.

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become more open, pupil-councils have been introduced in some schools, project teaching is occasionally carried out in which pupils are encouraged to take the initiative, and sometimes children's rights are taught. However, the basic hierarchical structure and the unequal institutional power relationship between teachers and pupils have remained intact. It is still the teacher who sets the tone, despite being subject to the dictates of the subject matter and the requirements of the school authorities. Within the framework of these guidelines, the teacher decides what knowledge is recognized as valid and how it is evaluated. The forms of domination over the pupils continue in a less visible way by totalizing them in a bureaucratic, seemingly impersonal form. Symbolic and psychological violence is used here, for example through humiliation and shaming (see Hafeneger, 2014; Niggemann, 2021).

Learning remains separate from life outside school, and the knowledge to be learned is largely predetermined. The repeatedly emphasized goal of transforming school from a bureaucratically regulated *learning* space into an open *living* space that respects the rights of young people is undermined by the compulsory and coercive nature of the school learning system. Schools continue to make children unilaterally dependent on people who have power *over* them. The basic function of the school, to be an instrument for the civilization of children who are still "immature", has remained the same.⁸ The forms of participation enshrined in school law and backed by the *UN Convention on the Rights of the Child* (Article 12) remain instrumentally oriented towards the goal of fulfilling the purposes of the school, only in a more flexible way.

In everyday school life, adultism manifests itself above all in the teacher's actions towards the pupils. However, adultist behavior is neither arbitrary nor unconditional, but results from the social functions of the school and its internal power structure, which adheres to the bourgeois-capitalist social order.⁹ Decisions

⁸ This function is sometimes also referred to as the colonization of childhood (Holzkamp, 1994; Cannella & Viruru, 2004).

⁹ Educational sociologist Helmut Fend (2011) sees these functions as *enculturation* into the existing social order, *qualification* for the work requirements inherent in the system, *selection* in the sense of the allocation of life chances and *integration* in the sense of maintaining "social peace" in a divided and unequal society.



about the nature of knowledge and its transmission are always made from top down in the school system. Pupils are subjected to one-way questions and knowledge transfer. In the words of psychologist Klaus Holzkamp (1992)

the pupil is in the degrading situation of having to constantly tell the teacher things that the teacher already knows and to bore him systematically, so to speak. [...] The purpose of the whole thing is only to evaluate the students' answers, but not to acknowledge their content (ibid., 10:26).

According to Holzkamp, the mixture of this pedagogical communication with a rigid developmental psychology that hastily categorizes children and evaluates their performance is one of the main sources of the school's ideology of oppression (see ibid., 23:17).

In order to show more concretely how adultism manifests and reproduces itself in everyday school life, we draw on a phenomenological study by the educationalist Friedrich Thiemann (1985) on domination and suffering at school. The study was conducted in Germany on the basis of observations and conversations with students studying to become teachers who recalled their own school experiences as children. The author does not use the term adultism, as it was not in use at the time the study was conducted. However, the way in which he describes and explains the development and effects of power dynamics between teachers and pupils corresponds to what is referred to today as adultism.

According to Thiemann's diagnosis, a key reason for the permanent reproduction of adultism in everyday school life can be seen in the fact that "pupils do not voluntarily give their consent to school teaching" (ibid., p. 7). Since their obedience must always be insured first, teaching is always "threatened with collapse" (ibid.) despite its institutionalization. It must therefore be staged using all possible means of power. In classrooms, particular importance is attached to the spatial arrangements, the forms of movement in the room, the gaze with which teachers measure the pupils and the voices that rule in the classroom.

While young people are often happy to finally enroll in school, after a few years of school experience they have lost the joy of learning and have to be repeatedly motivated to do so. This is due to the fact that learning at school is largely a compulsory event, and it is not clear to the children what it is all for –

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apart from being rewarded or punished with grades. The lesson contents are prearranged without the young people's life experiences and perspectives playing a role and with little connection to their daily lives. In the classroom, young people must therefore be repeatedly tricked or pressured into engaging with the subject matter. This creates an adultist situation in which the teachers are the ones who determine and the pupils are the more or less reluctant performers. Day after day, the teachers are faced with the problem of keeping the children quiet, "taming" them and obliging them to follow rules. In order to fulfill this task, they cannot act *with* the young people, but must act *against* them. The supposed common interest between teachers and pupils repeatedly reveals itself as an illusion.

from overt to covert control

Over the course of the 20th century, the open exercise of violence was transformed into variations of hidden control that are more difficult to identify. Visible teacher violence may have disappeared, but the attempts to produce a willingness to learn remain every bit as vicious. The violence of the rod, with which the loyalty of the pupils had to be secured, was replaced by the constantly controlling gaze of the teachers, who are forced to encase themselves in armor for fear of failure. This often leads to psychological exhaustion and burnout among teachers.

The elevated conductor's podium as the visible center of the teacher's power has had its day. The surveillance of the classroom has abandoned its fixed frontal location, but it has not disappeared. In fact, the flexible spatial arrangement tends to totalize surveillance. In the theory of *invisible pedagogy*, which goes back to the educational researcher Basil Bernstein (1977; see Sertl & Leufer, 2012), these mechanisms are described as a vague framing of what is accepted, valued or relevant. In contrast to visible pedagogies and curricula, which seem to give clear instructions, pupils have a sense of choice but must also accede to unspoken demands and expectations from the teacher. Similarly, the theory of the *hidden curriculum*, which is based on studies by cultural anthropologist Philip Jackson (1968), focuses on the entire spatial learning environment of the school (see



Zinnecker, 1975; Giroux & Penna, 1979). Sociologists Samuel Bowles and Herbert Gintis (1976) draw a direct link from the hidden curriculum to the formation of the capitalist labor market by demonstrating that schools are structured and intended to prepare people for the rules of the adult workplace.

These new types of pedagogy expect the child to control itself without being explicitly asked to do so. Corresponding learning patterns, which seem to replace coercion with self-determination (see Preuss-Lausitz, Rülcker & Zeiher, 1990), manifest a neoliberal concept of freedom (see Cradock, 2007), which appeals to the individual's responsibility for their own fate and expects them to constantly optimize themselves. Due to the neoliberal acceleration and flexibilization of society, the pressure to optimize children is also increasing and the "paces or play areas of childhood [have] simultaneously become smaller, less permanent and less reliable or less manageable" (King, 2013, p. 32).

The adultist orientation of schools is changing in such a way that a new mechanism of exercising power is emerging which no longer relies primarily on prohibitions and punishment, but on channeling and integration, e.g. by means of classroom management strategies. Unauthorized and undesirable behavior on the part of pupils is, seemingly paradoxically, lured out and then steered in a more acceptable direction. The previously dominant exclusion of the non-conformist and unruly is itself marginalized. It now appears as a "special measure in the treatment of those who can no longer be integrated" (Thiemann, 1985, p. 118), such as the so-called school truants and drop-outs, who are treated with special support programs. These programs are almost never part of mainstream school, but are handed over to specialized organizations that use "alternative" arrangements to try to regain interest in learning and catch up on school-leaving qualifications. In contrast to mainstream schools, these programs focus on dialogical forms of communication and learning is linked back to everyday life experiences. Adultist discrimination lies primarily in moral devaluation, repressive treatment and disregard for the reasons that some young people refuse to attend school or otherwise stay away from it. In many countries, these reasons can be traced back to the fact that the school system excludes social practices in which children

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assume co-responsibility for their families and communities, e.g. by performing certain work (Liebel, 2004, p. 77-111).

According to sociologist Helga Zeiher (2007), children in late modernity are assigned special spaces in which they are to be protected and prepared for future professions by being regarded as potential “human capital”. They are measured by their contribution to future prosperity, which is considered necessary for the continuity and further development of society. Therefore, the knowledge to be learned at school is always geared towards economic exploitability. More recently, however, a “time crunch” – due to the reduced shelf life of knowledge in the information-based society – means that more short-term planning is required, even though children are still seen in long-term developmental relationships. Ironically, children are already part of the economy (e.g. as consumers), but their “learning work” is not yet remunerated (see Qvortrup, 2001). This means that the future relevance of learning is in crisis. Although the importance of knowledge in the economy is increasing, its period of validity is decreasing. It is difficult to predict what demands the capitalist world of work will bring when children leave school. At the same time, competition is growing and parents are increasing pressure on their children to succeed. As a result of this contradiction, more and more children are failing at school (Zeiher, 2007, p. 62). This is especially true for those children who are already disadvantaged and marginalized due to e.g. their socioeconomic background or skin color.

A school conceived from the children’s perspective (see Rumpf & Winter, 2019) seems far away. Despite many attempts at reform since the 1970s, it is difficult to imagine a mainstream school without adultism as long as compulsory education is not replaced by a *right to education* and the social and economic conditions are not created to ensure that this right can be exercised.

counteracting the adultist learning relationship

The question arises as to whether the adultism inscribed in schools can be challenged and overcome through other pedagogical concepts and practices. If not, it follows that the institution of school is adultist by its very nature, and



therefore non-adultist learning or education would require a different framework that is open to the everyday experiences of young people and the skills they acquire there.

There has long been and still is a debate about whether a non-adultist educational practice is even possible under the conditions of bourgeois-capitalist society, not only within the established state-run schools, but also in so-called free schools beyond state control (see e.g. Huisken, 2016, p. 436-462). The question arises again and again as to whether attempts should be made to introduce the ideas and experiences of free education into the established education system and in this way to change it, at least step by step (see e.g. Johnson, 2020; Pérez Rueda, 2022). We believe that it is not justifiable to do nothing or to wait for a revolutionary change in the capitalist mode of production, but that the pedagogical concepts and practices that we briefly present below are an indispensable resource for continually trying to provide children with a dignified and respectful form of learning. We think it is also worthwhile fighting for this in the established school system despite its inherent contradictions. We also see evidence that capitalism is not the only factor that shapes school systems and acknowledge numerous examples of children's agency and resistance within this framework.

The hierarchical and authoritarian educational relationship has been debated since the end of the 18th century and then more frequently since the beginning of the 20th century, especially by anarchist and socialist-oriented authors (see Purkis & Bowed, 2004; Suissa, 2019; on the USA: Avrich, 2006). Influential protagonists included William Godwin (1756–1836) and Mary Wollstonecraft (1759–1797), Leo Tolstoy (1828–1910) and Peter Kropotkin (1842–1921), Otto Rühle (1874–1943) and Siegfried Bernfeld (1892–1953). In more recent times, *Educação Popular* (Freire, [1968]2000) and *Critical Pedagogy* (e.g. Giroux, 1983, 1997; McLaren, 1988; 2003) should be mentioned in particular, as well as *Anti-Pedagogy* in Germany, which emerged in the course of the student movement from the late 1960s onwards (Von Braunmühl, [1975]2006).

The first *practical* attempts to counter the classic hierarchical educational relationship appeared in some countries starting in the second half of the 19th century. The beginnings of a pedagogical practice critical of adultism from today's perspective can be found in Russia. There, it was above all the rural school *Jasnaja Poljana*, founded by the writer Leo Tolstoy in 1859, and – based on it – the libertarian ideas of Peter Kropotkin and the group around the journal *Free Education*, that introduced completely new ideas of pedagogy (see Blaisdell, 2000). In a paper first published in 1905, Kropotkin enthusiastically emphasized that there was “no discipline whatsoever” in this school. “Instead of elaborating curricula according to which the children were to be taught, said Tolstoy, the teacher had to learn from the children themselves what he had to teach them. He had to adapt his teaching method to the individual inclinations and abilities of each child” (Kropotkin, 1905, cited in Klemm, 1984, p. 80). The first issue of the journal *Free Education* in 1907 stated: “The new school is the place of free work, of community between the children and those who want to help them. In the new school there is no place for coercion, for the assault of children's souls, in whatever way this may happen” (cited in Klemm, 2013, p. 52). Characteristic of these political and pedagogical movements was that they questioned all traditional forms of education in the family and school and demanded that educators must first and foremost “educate themselves” (Tolstoy, 1902, p. 29). With regard to children, they advocated the greatest possible “self-government” and participation in all social affairs. These ideas were also expressed in the so-called “Moscow Declaration of the Rights of the Child”, which was compiled in 1918 during the Russian Revolution (see Liebel, 2016).

The orphanages founded by Janusz Korczak – a Polish doctor, educator and writer – in Warsaw in 1913 and 1919 were based on similar ideas. They were organized according to democratic rules with extensive participation and self-administration by the children. There was a children's parliament, an orphanage newspaper, a children's plebiscite and a collegial court (see Korczak [1919-20]2018, p. 190–247). The latter served to resolve conflicts among the young residents and between children and adults as peacefully and justly as possible –



the founder himself was also summoned to appear before the collegial court. As Korczak knew that all adults would not voluntarily give up their privileges and claim to power over children, he appealed to *respect* the child.

Korczak went a decisive step further by calling for a basic law for children, which he called *Magna Charta Libertatis*. It contained the following three elementary rights: the “child’s right to die”, the “child’s right to the present day” and the “the child’s right to be what a child is” (Korczak, [1919–20]2018, p. 30). These rights were intended to protect the child from the clutches of adults, as imposed through science, psychologization, pedagogization, pseudo-love and pressure to perform. In a deliberately provocative way, they underline the children’s claim to free themselves from the absolute dominance, the “despotism” of adults. A decade later, Korczak condensed these basic rights into *the child’s right to respect* ([1929]2009). The basic rights of the child form the foundation of his educational critique as well as his pedagogy. They argue that children have an independent position in relation to their educators and that interaction with them must take place in dialogue on the basis of equal dignity. Korczak encouraged educators to be responsible for all their words and actions (see Liebel, 2018). Today, such maxims are repeated by pedagogues critical of adultism.

popular education and critical pedagogy

More recently, educational concepts and practices have emerged that can also provide inspiration for a non-adultist pedagogy. These include *Educação Popular* (Popular Education), which has emerged in Latin America since the 1960s, and *Critical Pedagogy*, which we present here in its variants developed in the USA.

Popular education is understood as an educational concept and practice that equips dominated population groups with the knowledge necessary to resist oppression and exploitation and to achieve socially just living conditions. This educational concept, which can largely be traced back to the Brazilian pedagogue and philosopher Paulo Freire ([1968]2000), was originally conceived as adult education, but for more than three decades has also been applied in social and

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educational work with young people. It is closely related to popular movements and often part of a practice of self-empowerment.

The educational processes that Popular Education aims for are based on a participatory and “dialogical” method that excludes any kind of funnel pedagogy and indoctrination. Those involved in the educational process should be able to play an active role at all stages. Instead of rigid professionalism, which demands a strict separation between teachers and learners, in Popular Education everyone is understood as a learner, and all can/should – depending on the situation – act as a teacher. Where professional educators are involved, they are expected to be open to the experiences and knowledge of the participants and to be willing to learn “from the people”. The participants are expected to become so-called people’s teachers and social engineers who, in the course of educational practice, take on pedagogical, research and organizing activities on their own initiative. Teachers’ role is that of advisors who accompany and support the (learning) groups and communities as “moderators”.

Since the 1980s, Popular Education has partially broken away from its fixation on adults and started to take a greater interest in the specific situation of young people and children. They are seen as “part of the people”, no longer just as a kind of appendage, but as subjects with their own rights, interests and needs. Supported by communal or grassroots church initiative groups, direct engagement with children and adolescents emerged in numerous communities and neighborhoods (see Cussiánovich, 2022; Liebel, 2023). This sometimes led to conflicts with adult residents and also caused some turbulence in left-wing social movements, but ultimately contributed to questioning the traditional paternalism of adults and increasing respect and tolerance for the specific lifestyles and forms of expression of young people. Since then, explicitly anti-racist, intercultural and feminist approaches have also spread within Popular Education.

Critical Pedagogy can be seen as an equivalent to Popular Education in the countries of the Global North. It is also based on an educational conception that conceives teaching and learning as a dialogical relationship. In the USA, the term Critical Pedagogy was first used in the early 1980s by educationalist Henry Giroux



(1983). Another leading theorist of Critical Pedagogy is educational scientist Peter McLaren (2003). McLaren developed a version based on a social movement, which he calls “Revolutionary Critical Pedagogy” and offers as a social movement to create a democratic socialist alternative to capitalism. In their *Critical Pedagogy Reader*, Darder, Baltodano and Torres (2009, p. 103) summarize this idea as follows:

Critical pedagogical principles encourage educators to reclaim class as both an analytical category and political toolkit, in order to effectively unpack the idealist assumptions and social implications of schools as the great equalizer, in a system driven by the dictates of profit, rather than those of human need.

Critical Pedagogy was also inspired by authors who were fundamentally critical of learning in schools and who advocated perspectives of “unschooling” or “deschooling” society (Illich, 1970; Holt, [1967]1991; 1974).

Over the years, different variants of Critical Pedagogy have emerged. Some explicitly refer to schools and classrooms and aim to transform schools into democratic institutions. They examine the effects that education has on pupils, especially those who are disenfranchised and oppressed by traditional schooling. Its proponents understand education as a continuous process, which they refer to as “unlearning”, “relearning”, “reflection” and “evaluation”. They start from the assumption “that all people have the capacity and ability to produce knowledge and to resist domination” (Darder, Baltodano & Torres, 2009, p. 13). A controversial question among critical educators is whether the teacher may or should use his or her “authority” to impart critical awareness to pupils (see e.g. Shor, 1980; Kincheloe, 2008a; 2008b). Social scientist Toby Rollo and co-authors (Rollo et al., 2020) take this discussion as an opportunity to draw attention to the fact that Critical Pedagogy can also contain adultist tendencies. However, they also point out that

[t]he tradition of critical pedagogy has thus long recognized that it is an ontologically complex research project that seeks to work alternatively from and for the grassroots-as-political subject(s) rather than from a class of privileged experts whose work often objectifies knowledge (and others) on behalf of universal standards of truth that disenfranchise/dis-empower many (Rollo et al., 2020, p. 998, with reference to Kincheloe, McLaren & Steinberg, 2011; see also Fletcher, 2013).

In this way, Critical Pedagogy seeks to create local research communities in which knowledge and power are democratically acquired and distributed among members of the community to serve their own desires and demands as part of an active movement for greater communal self-determination and social empowerment (Ozer, Ritterman & Wanis, 2010). “Increasingly, over the last two decades, critical pedagogical researchers have overtly recognized the need to challenge adultist methods, ideas, values, and outcomes” (Rollo et al., 2020, p. 998).

In a variation that is associated with the names of educational scholars Joe Kincheloe and Shirley Steinberg (1997; 2008), Critical Pedagogy aims to become a global decolonizing movement dedicated to listening to and learning from the diverse discourses of people from around the world. In particular, the two authors see indigenous knowledge in education as a way to expand Critical Pedagogy and challenge Western educational hegemony.¹⁰ In this sense, critical educators today seek “to reach beyond the boundaries of the classroom, into communities, workplaces, and public arenas where people congregate, reflect, and negotiate daily survival” (Darder, Baltodano & Torres, 2009: 18).

Post- and decolonial educational associations (e.g. the German *bildungsLab** or US university initiatives such as *Decolonize the Curriculum*) also radically question the content of hegemonic educational canons. They ask which knowledge content has prevailed due to which socially sedimented power constellations, which understandings of the subject come into play, which colonial continuities persist and which inclusions and exclusions are produced among teachers and learners as a result. In order to decolonize education, an epistemic change is necessary that decenters Europe and the *white* man and instead considers marginalized (e.g. indigenous) experiences as places of theory generation (Mohamed, 2021, p. 29). Other emancipatory and decolonial educational

¹⁰ One of the most important texts on the interface between critical pedagogy and indigenous knowledge that criticizes critical pedagogy from an indigenous perspective can be found in the book *Red Pedagogy: Native American Social and Political Thought* (Grande, 2004; see also Grande, 2009).

approaches that have emerged in the Global South should also be explored for this purpose (see e.g. Kleibl et al., 2020).

alternative pedagogical practices

An example of an educational practice in the USA that, although it does not use the term “adultism”, can be understood as critical of adultism, is the *Highlander Research and Education Center*. It was founded in Tennessee in 1932 as a type of learning center for self-determined collective action.¹¹ Three aspects of Highlander’s educational conception are particularly important and were new in the US at the time. The first was the idea that people should not learn in isolation from social life, but through experience gained in real-life situations. In the words of founder Myles Horton:

“If we are to think seriously about liberating people to cope with their own lives, we must refuse to limit the educational process to what can go on only in schools. The bars must come down; the doors must fly open; nonacademic life – real life – must be encompassed by education. Multiple approaches must be invented, each one considered educative in its own right” (Horton, 1973, p. 331).

This concept was inspired by the Danish Folk School Movement of the 1920s and, in a broader sense, by Tolstoy’s pedagogical ideas. Horton expanded this concept from an emphasis on agricultural fieldwork and crafts to the experience of self-organization, cooperative economics and participation in strikes in the learning environment. As a form of cooperative economy, the *Highlander Folk Cooperative*, a cannery largely self-managed by the pupils, opened in 1934. Pupil participation in strikes and picket lines in major actions in the region was also one of the features of the school (Horton, 1989, p. 54). Horton went further than the Danish Folk Schools in believing that people, including pupils, find the answers to their own problems based on their life experiences.

The Highlander project was based on the conviction that change in a community is only possible if it comes from local participants contributing their skills, ideas and actions. It was based on dialog as a means of getting a community of people to make decisions. In the conference room, for example, there were

¹¹ In our discussion of Highlander, we refer to Westerman (2009) and Rollo et al. (2020) as well as the statements of the founder Myles Horton and his wife and collaborator Zilphia Horton quoted there.

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rocking chairs that invited participants to listen and think critically about their ideas and those of others. The goal of such a dialogical process was to offer several ideas that could be tried out, even if they might fail. Today, the center continues these processes and formulates its mission as follows:

Highlander serves as a catalyst for grassroots organizing and movement building in Appalachia and the U.S. South. Through popular education, participatory research, and cultural work, we help to create spaces – at Highlander and in local communities – where people gain knowledge, hope and courage, expanding their ideas of what is possible (Highlander Center, 2017).

Highlander is just one of many alternative education initiatives, learning centers and schools that have emerged in various parts of the world since the beginning of the 20th century and continue to exist and emerge today. These include:

- the *Summerhill School* in Great Britain, founded by Alexander Neill in 1921 and still in existence today (Neill, 1960);
- the *Freinet schools*, based on the ideas of Célestin and Élise Freinet, in several countries since the 1930s (Freinet, 1993; Lee, 1993);
- the democratic and free schools in various countries, which are in the tradition of the *Sudbury Schools* founded in the USA in 1968 (Wilson, 2015), but also have many role models in anarchist and libertarian pedagogy (Suissa, 2019);
- the open and free street schools that flourished in the USA in the 1970s (Kozol, 1972; Miller, 2002), some of which continue today in the form of community schools (Heers et al., 2016);
- the communal production schools that emerged in rural regions of Peru in the 1970s (Liebel, 2004, p. 238-244);
- the educational initiatives of the Brazilian Landless Workers Movement (MST) in Brazil that started in the 1980s (Senn Tarlau, 2018);
- the *Escuelitas Zapatistas* in the autonomous Zapatista communities in south-eastern Mexico that emerged after the neo-Zapatista uprising in 1994 (Baschet, 2014; Escuelita Zapatista, 2014).

As different as their concepts and practices were and are in their details, they also had and still have significant similarities. These include:



- that learning is linked to real life in the local community, often with manual or agricultural work;
- that they are based on anti-authoritarian and democratic principles and that the relationships between teachers and learners are organized in a dialogical way, whereby teachers also become learners;
- that learning is understood as political learning, in the course of which a critical awareness and committed action against illegitimate rule develops;
- that they see themselves as an alternative to the existing schools that are separated from life and based on unequal power.

All of these new pedagogical approaches are attempts to counteract the unequal power relations between young and older people. We cannot know whether they have always succeeded or are succeeding in achieving an adultism-free coexistence of adults and children, but they do provide a strong impetus in this direction. Some consciously organize themselves outside the state-organized and controlled school system, while others see themselves as the basis and starting point for a fundamental change in this system.

working together against adultism within school

Adultism is omnipresent in the established, mostly state-run schools. In order to counteract it, the system-stabilizing functions and mechanisms of domination must be undermined, be it through *critical adulthood* (Ritz & Schwarz, 2022) on the part of the teacher or through more counterforce and *empowerment* of the pupils. Teachers can treat pupils with more appreciation and “create agendas of possibility in their classrooms” (McLaren, 2009, p. 80). To do this, they must come to terms with their role as *censors* and *distributors* of life opportunities, question this role and develop in the direction of *companions* or *advisors*. They can enable pupils to constantly evaluate their lessons and encourage and support them in standing up for more rights at school. They would have to counter the one-way school knowledge transfer that is molded into the classic subject-object-teaching relationship. This means recognizing pupils as equal producers of knowledge, i.e. being prepared to learn *with* and *from* them (see Freire, [1968]2000; hooks, 1994).

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In *The Ignorant Schoolmaster*, philosopher Jacques Rancière (1991) discussed the inequality inherent in the pedagogical relationship. Due to the factual equality of all intelligences, the conventional teaching system, which makes a clear distinction between teacher and subordinate pupil, can only be one of stultification. He criticizes the assumption that there is a gap between the knowledgeable and the ignorant, which can be filled but never closed and is only be determined by the knowledgeable. The inferiority of the pupils is thus institutionally secured, extended into infinity, and they are denied the ability to question this implicit dichotomy. The function assigned to teachers obliges them to maintain the distance between themselves, who know what there is to know, and their pupils, who do not even know their ignorance, in order not to make themselves superfluous in their position.

Teachers must therefore open themselves up to new understandings of education that are not (only) conceived in institutional terms, but are expanded in terms of *learning opportunities* everywhere and at all times. Since young people have a right to these diverse learning opportunities, teachers would not be released from their responsibility, but would have to shift from a teacher-oriented “didactics of production” to a pupil-oriented “didactics of facilitation” (Arnold & Schüßler, 1998, cited in Klemm, 2001, p. 17). Accordingly, there is a need for a different motivational psychological view of the learning *subjects*, who control their learning processes in a self-determined and autonomous manner. The desire described by the psychologist Klaus Holzkamp (1995, p. 449) for *expansive learning*, in the sense of a self-initiated “expansion of life possibilities and overcoming dependencies”, confirms how necessary such a paradigm shift is. It could also counteract the desire for *defensive learning* described by Holzkamp as a warding off of sanctions (see also Holt, [1967]1991; Kaindl, 2009; hooks, 1994).

The existing opportunities for pupils to participate in decisions are not sufficient to level out unequal power relations at school. The opportunities for pupils to assert their views and interests in school through the institution of pupil representation (or pupil co-administration) are inadequate, as they do not have the necessary rights, resources and means of power (see Liebel, 2015, p. 264–272). In



addition, pupil participation is still predominantly understood in an instrumental way as a pedagogical measure to encourage involvement and maintain peace at school. Many private schools with alternative pedagogical concepts, which might abolish grades or focus on more creativity or movement but continue to follow a predetermined pedagogical agenda, can be seen in a similar light. Pedagogical concepts that aim to counteract adultism would have to recognize and reject the fundamental power asymmetries of the school. The least that could be done would be to set up low-threshold and effective complaint mechanisms for pupils to challenge their unjust treatment.

The abolition of compulsory schooling could also help to counteract institutional adultism. According to Klemm (2001), the fundamental questioning of the school institution as a place of learning for children has an “almost blasphemous character” in Germany, as it is “seen in all political camps as a central social achievement of the enlightened modern age and accordingly highly valued as a stabilizing factor for democratic societies” (ibid., p. 18). In our opinion, it would be all the more important to introduce a right to education that would go hand in hand with a new infrastructure for free education, as has already been called for several times in the past under various names (especially with regard to the question of “deschooling” (e.g. Illich, 1970[2003]; Stern, 2006; Kern, 2016).

To this day, *free learner*, *unschooling* and *homeschooling* movements, as well as numerous educators, philosophers and scientists, criticize the current school system or consider compulsory state schooling to be a violation of human rights. Some of these associations are rightly criticized for serving as a gateway for right-wing ideologies, fundamentalism, indoctrination, esotericism or conspiracy theories. Large parts of the US homeschooling movement, e.g. are accused of propagating a fundamentalist Christian worldview. Their primary concern is “not the freedom of children and adolescents to educate themselves freely – instead, homeschooling serves the purpose of keeping everything away from the children that contradicts their parents’ worldview” (Duwe, 2014, n.p.). In order to fend off such ideologies, intersectional power-critical positions of all those involved are necessary, combined with comprehensive free and self-determined access to

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knowledge¹². In general, a further dialectical development of school critique is required, which the pioneers we mentioned above initiated in the 20th century. On the one hand, we recognize that, from the perspective of some children, school can help liberate them from family traditions and dependencies. On the other hand, the ideological or religious appropriation of school-critical positions by some adults does not mean,

that schools in their current form or compulsory schooling should be defended here! This does not mean that it is not important to free children from school. But this attempt inevitably leads right into the middle of a complicated social-historical dialectic in which there is no longer a simple good and evil. We need to think more in terms of ambivalences if we want to criticize school and not drift into the apolitical (Kittstein, 2016, n.p.).

To this end, it is necessary to understand free education not as a private way out of social constraints, but as a political statement that intervenes in social conflicts.

Pupils rarely rebel openly against the control regime and the degradation they experience at school, as they are in an extremely dependent position and have to compete against each other. When they do fight back, they usually do so by resisting

the 'dead time' of school, where interpersonal relationships are reduced to the imperatives of market ideology. Resistance, in other words, is a rejection of their reformulation as docile objects where spontaneity is replaced by efficiency and productivity, in compliance with the needs of the corporate marketplace. Accordingly, students' very bodies become sites of struggle, and resistance a way of gaining power, celebrating pleasure, and fighting oppression in the lived historicity of the moment (McLaren, 2009, p. 79).

Under exceptional circumstances, collective rebellion can occur, as was demonstrated on a broad basis in the late 1960s (on Germany, see Liebel & Wellendorf, 1969) or since 2018 in the school strikes of the climate-political movement *Fridays for Future* (see Meade, 2020; Biswas, 2020), and as is repeatedly expressed in daily skirmishes. In the classroom, there is usually an ambivalent

¹² With technological progress, access to knowledge is increasingly shifting to the internet. It is therefore extremely important to take a critical look at the role of algorithms, filter bubbles, echo chambers, fake news and social networks. Under certain circumstances, these can stand in the way of free access to knowledge or reduce the ability to critically recognize misinformation (see e.g. Ross Arguedas et al., 2022).



mixture of reluctance and individual attempts at liberation, that seek their own psychological relief. But this can change unexpectedly and turn into mutual solidarity if the sense of justice is all too obviously violated and the instilled tolerance for frustration is overstretched. Then, being together in the same institution and class community can give rise to a feeling of solidarity that calls into question the adultism experienced on a daily basis.

History shows that change is most likely to be initiated when pupils fight back collectively and demand their rights. Autonomously created student newspapers (nowadays often in the form of blogs or social media) and independent student organizations can be important mouthpieces for strengthening their own position in the school's power system. They can contribute to a certain extent to student emancipation by breaking down the psychological blockages caused by permanent inferiority and subjugation. However, a powerful student movement that does not shy away from public protests, complaints, strikes or civil disobedience (see Biswas & Mattheis, 2021) does not emerge out of nowhere and cannot be conjured up. It will only be able to re-emerge if the barriers that repeatedly reproduce themselves between older and younger, privileged and socially disadvantaged pupils or along gender lines and other axes of inequality are also dismantled among the pupils themselves. An education system without adultism can only be achieved if pupils, regardless of their particular social identities, develop an awareness of their common interests that leads to solidarity-based action.

conclusion

In this article, we have explained why schools in bourgeois-capitalist society repeatedly reproduce adultism and why a school without adultism is not possible under current societal structures. However, we have also shown that it is possible to counteract adultism in schools if their unequal power structures are named and questioned. Concepts critical of adultism in education can be helpful for this as well as reflection on previous alternative forms of education. Nevertheless we must bear in mind that such concepts cannot be implemented

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without contradictions in the existing school frameworks. A central challenge is how the unequal power relations in schools can be counteracted and what role teachers on the one hand and pupils on the other can play in this. Another key challenge is how teachers deal with their power, which is always derived and fragile, and how they can help pupils to empower themselves and significantly influence learning and decision-making processes at school.

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