



Teacher education is a deeply pedagogical process rooted in values, ethics, and the social purpose of schooling. Globally, it sits at the core of educational quality and fairness, as research in comparative and international education demonstrates: the training of teachers directly influences students' learning chances, social inclusion, and the democratic aims of schools. Teachers are not simply transmitters of curricula, but active professionals whose convictions, reflective skills, and ability to manage the complexities of classroom life give shape and substance to the educational experience itself.

The pedagogical dimension of teacher education frames teaching as a relational, context-aware, and ethically grounded profession rather than just a set of procedural skills. From a research perspective, this demands robust research methodologies that can critically examine the complex realities of schools and inform evidence-based policies. Equally important is the connection between theory and practice, which helps to bridge the persistent gap between universities and schools.

The contributions gathered in this volume reflect the richness and diversity of experiences showcased during the ATEE Spring Conference 2024, held at the University of Bergamo from May 29 to June 1, 2024. The volume presents 70 selected papers out of more than 300 presented by researchers representing over 40 countries.

This broad spectrum of studies highlights promising directions that can inspire renewed inquiry and concrete proposals aimed at improving contemporary educational systems.

FRANCESCO MAGNI is an Associate Professor of General and Social Pedagogy (PAED-01/A) at the Department of Human and Social Sciences, University of Bergamo, Italy. He is a member of the board and Deputy Director of CQIIA (Center for the Quality of Teaching, Didactic Innovation, and Learning). He is also a member of the ATEE - Association for Teacher Education in Europe.

NICOLE BIANQUIN is an Associate Professor of Didactics and Special Education (PAED-02/A) at the Department of Human and Social Sciences, University of the Aosta Valley, Aosta, Italy. She is a member of the ATEE - Association for Teacher Education in Europe.

ATEE Spring Conference 2024

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Teacher education research in Europe: trends, challenges, practices and perspectives

May 29th – June 1st, 2024
S. Agostino, Bergamo



Edited by Nicole Bianquin and Francesco Magni





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BOOK OF PROCEEDINGS

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Bleak Pedagogy: A new term unveiled from research on Adultcentrism

Eleonora Florio, *University of Bergamo*, eleonora.florio@guest.unibg.it
Tanu Biswas, *University of Stavanger*, tanu.biswas@uis.no
Ilaria Castelli, *University of Bergamo*, ilaria.castelli@unibg.it
Letizia Caso, *LUMSA University of Rome*, l.caso@lumsa.it

Abstract

With this work we propose an overview of the studies that led to the operationalization of Adultcentrism (AD) and Black Pedagogy (BP) scales. Moreover, we outline the international research connections with childist theoretical perspective, which has been analyzed in its potential to promote age-inclusive developments and educational methodologies (Biswas et al., 2023). Indeed, through the analyses of our results, it has become clear that Adultcentrism seems to reflect the natural point of view of adults, which risks leading to detrimental practices only if exacerbated (Florio et al., 2022a). Furthermore, the construct of Black Pedagogy proved to be particularly useful if used in a non-judgmental way (Florio et al., 2023), prompting the proposal of the new term “Bleak Pedagogy”.

Keywords: adultcentrism; bleak pedagogy; black pedagogy; authoritarian education; childism.

1. Introduction

The term “Bleak” Pedagogy emerges in our discourses in replacement of “Black” Pedagogy as a reinterpretation of entrenched educational practices grounded in the dominance of an exacerbated adultcentric *forma mentis*. Presented during the ATEE Spring Conference 2024, this contribution investigates how adult-biased frameworks shape pedagogical practices based on power and oppression that lead to detrimental outcomes for children. Drawing on empirical research and theoretical interventions, the authors advocate for a transformative approach that deconstructs traditional power dynamics and highlights the urgent need for age-inclusive pedagogies. This paper delves into the origins, implications, and potential transformations surrounding the terms “adultcentrism” and “bleak pedagogy”.

2. The foundational role of adultcentrism

Adultcentrism refers to the pervasive bias inherent in adult-child relationships, where adult perspectives dominate and marginalize children’s voices (Foti, 2004; Furioso, 2000; Goode, 1986; Mackay, 1974, 2003; Pedrocco Biancardi, 2002). Operationalized by Florio, Caso, and Castelli (2020a), adultcentrism emerges as a “natural” viewpoint for adults but becomes problematic when unrecognized (Florio et al., 2022). It perpetuates harmful assumptions, such as the belief that adults possess superior judgment or inherent authority over children (Bell, 1988, 1995; Checkoway, 1996; Fletcher, 2013; Fletcher & Vavrus, 2006; Rodríguez Tramolao, 2013). Empirical tools, such as the Adultcentrism Scale (Florio et al., 2020a, 2022), facilitate the study of this construct, offering insights into how it informs societal norms and parenting practices.

The adultcentric paradigm is particularly concerning due to its role in normalizing authoritarian educational practices. The risk of escalating adultcentrism into overt control has been discussed in Florio et al. (2022), if exacerbated, it fosters environments where children’s needs and perspectives are consistently subordinated to adult priorities. An example is using and endorsing “Black Pedagogy” practices: this term, rooted in historical authoritarian practices (Rutschky, 1977, 2015), encompasses methods characterized by control, punishment, and the systemic use of power over children. It has been largely discussed its reliance on physical and psychological violence as ‘necessary’ tools for toughening children up in view of adult life (Brokate, 2005; Miller, 1980, 1983, 2007), but – despite being increasingly critiqued by professionals (Peticari, 2016) –, subtler forms of these practices remain embedded in contemporary educational and cultural norms (Florio et al., 2020b, 2022).

3. From Black Pedagogy to Bleak Pedagogy: Reconceptualizing power dynamics

The transition from “Black” Pedagogy to “Bleak” Pedagogy reflects a fundamental shift in understanding, since the term bleak has been chosen to escape from the good-bad opposition (Florio et al., 2023) when referring to adults’ educational role and to capture the desolation and lack of alternative pedagogical resources in authoritarian frameworks. This can lead the adult to experience frustration, as there seems to be no other way to act, thus fostering a feeling of having to do something very unpleasant but deemed necessary for the child’s own good.

On the occasion of the ATEE Spring Conference 2024, we sought to illustrate our reasoning through selected famous paintings that, in our view, effectively capture the emotional and relational impact of a bleak pedagogy in action.

Giovanni Segantini’s painting (cf. Fig. 1) *Le cattive madri* (The bad mothers) portrays a windswept, unwelcoming landscape, devoid of nurturing resources. The depiction of an arid and desolate landscape serves as a stage for the atonement of those bad mothers who are guilty of not adhering to the purest values of motherhood; a scene rich in symbolism, inspired by the lyrics of his friend Luigi Illica, who translated a segment of the poem *Pandjavalì* (Giovannelli, 2014; del Bondio, 1999).



Figure 1: Giovanni Segantini – *Le cattive madri* (*The bad mothers*), 1894.

By virtue of the subjective nature of artistic reception experience, we would like to share what is our purely personal impression arising when looking at this stark depiction: it reminded us of the desolation and lack of alternatives that characterize Bleak Pedagogy as we conceptualize it, where the adult often appears to be the first to suffer. Yet, this bleak environment is not without hope: it stands as a powerful call to action, urging us to see its emptiness not as an endpoint, but as a canvas for transformation. It offers space, a space to plant the seeds of new resources and ideas, though the barren ground must first be tilled with care and intention. This is more than an invitation; it is a challenge to reimagine these desolate landscapes as fertile ground for growth, renewal, and boundless potential for the well-being of both the child and the adult.

Similarly, Edvard Munch's *Evening on Karl Johan Street* (Fig. 2) deeply resonated with us and informed our reflections, as it provides a haunting portrayal of alienation and gloom.



Figure 2: Edvard Munch – *Evening on Karl Johan Street*, 1892.

The effectiveness of this depiction allows us to illustrate what we believe could also be the isolating nature of oppressive pedagogies, whose system of premises becomes purely self-referential and endowed with a high internal coherence, making it difficult to escape – or even to find the desire or motivation to envision or pursue alternatives. It is interesting to highlight an aspect of Munch’s artistic practice in this regard: notably, his “horse cure,” (i.e. *Hestekur*) which involved exposing his works to the natural elements – rain, snow, wind, and even decay – precisely to temper them and make them more “real”¹. The deliberate exposure of the paintings to the harsh elements, intended to temper them, inspired us to draw a parallel with the rationale of bleak pedagogy. This educational approach subjects children to adverse conditions under the pretext of preparing them for the challenges of adult life. The concept of “toughening up through adversity” lies at the heart of this critique, underscoring the urgent need for a balanced approach that nurtures both resilience and care in child-rearing. In summary, the transition from “Black Pedagogy” to “Bleak Pedagogy” represents not merely a terminological shift but a call for a profound reconsideration of the power dynamics embedded in educational practices. Bleak Pedagogy becomes evident in practice when adults rely heavily on the authority of their role to educate, highlighting the absence of alternative strategies – we can hypothesize that this occurs particularly in societal environments dominated by norms or demands that create external pressures, requiring adults to achieve certain results with young people. The centrality of power highlights the emotional and intellectual deprivation caused by such methods and risks becoming the only framework young people learn to express their needs, which they may later replicate by asserting their authority over adults when they perceive an opportunity to do so (e.g., adolescent rebellion), thus perpetuating intergenerational transmission.

4. Empirical insights

The empirical foundation underpinning our reasoning is based on several studies involving diverse groups of participants. It is important to specify that in this paragraph, we refer exclusively to our previous works, as the scales of Adultcentrism and Bleak Pedagogy are relatively new, and no publications by other authors have yet associated these two constructs within a research design. During the initial validation phase of the Adultcentrism Scale and the Bleak Pedagogy Scale (referred to as the Black Pedagogy Scale at the time), analyses were conducted on the responses of university students and parents of Italian primary school pupils (Florio et al., 2020b, 2020a). Subsequently, the responses of primary school teachers were analyzed in the study *Detrimental Educational Practices Deemed as Culturally Acceptable: Adultcentrism and Black Pedagogy in Italian Primary Schools* (Florio et al., 2022). Further analyses were carried out in the work *Mind-Mindedness and Educational Stance in a Sample of Primary School Teachers* (Florio et al., 2023), with additional papers currently submitted or in preparation. In these studies, alongside the exploration of the constructs’ meanings through a comprehensive literature review, we also focused on quantitative analyses and methodologies, supported by the substantial number of participants who engaged with our research proposal. This robust participation enabled us to conduct various analyses, including Exploratory and Confirmatory Factor Analyses (EFA and CFA), linear regression analysis, and Structural Equation Modeling (SEM)—the latter being part of a paper currently under submission. The Adultcentrism Scale and the Bleak Pedagogy Scale allowed us to quantify and analyze these constructs, revealing significant correlations between adultcentrism and the authoritarian practices described by the Bleak Pedagogy construct. Key findings emphasize the predictive role of adultcentrism in fostering bleak pedagogical practices. Interestingly, participants demonstrated greater agreement with the values of bleak pedagogy than with its methods, suggesting a tendency to reject its practices. These results underscore the urgency of addressing underlying biases and developing interventions that promote an educational stance inclusive of children’s culture and perspectives.

¹ “The artist is, in fact, convinced that his own works being tools for communicating feelings of decay, destruction and dissolution, to expose them to the air, to the elements of nature (rain, wind, snow, sun...) and to the contact with the world (dust, rust, excrement, mold, wax, candle smoke...) is a way to temper them and make them protagonists of that ‘cure’ which is part of the artistic genesis”. (Duò, 2023, p. 58) - Own translation from Italian to English

5. Childism as a transformative structural lens

Perspectives The transformative purpose of the Adultcentrism Scale and Bleak Pedagogy Scale extends beyond their applicability for promoting children's cultures and perspectives within existing educational systems. While these Scales provide valuable insights for micro-level organizational changes and pedagogical practices, it is essential to recognize the broader social critique revealed by the paradigm of adult-centrism and related concepts like adultism. Education, as an intergenerational relationship, is shaped by cultural norms, institutional frameworks, and political economy that often rely on age-based segregation and hierarchies. Understanding the power dynamics and transformative potential of these relational divisions requires examining how oppressive structures are sustained through constructed notions of "adulthood" and "childhood."

By applying the Scales, adults can become more aware of their privileges and use this awareness to rethink educational structures that move beyond age-based hierarchies. For example, education need not be limited to adults teaching children but can also involve adults *learning from* children (Biswas, 2021), fostering more inclusive intergenerational relationships.

This transformative response to age-based hierarchies is a core principle of childism. In its most expansive sense, childism advocates for the recognition, social justice, and inclusion of all humans. The ethicist John Wall (2019) illustrates the movement's epistemological trajectory by comparing childism to feminism, highlighting its dual role in deconstructing adultism's history and reconstructing new social norms. In this way, childist interventions challenge dominant understandings of childhood, which have historically been rooted in the subordination of children by adults, and expand the vision of what it means to build inclusive human communities.

It is mention worthy that while movements such as the New School movement, along with related efforts like the progressive education movement (Kennedy 2018) and the Italian *Movimento di Cooperazione Educativa* (Tripi 2024), do reflect childist inclinations—particularly in their critiques of authority and their advocacy for child-centered, democratic schooling—what distinguishes childism is its potential to offer structural pathways for transforming the economic, political, and social nexus of society beyond the school. As David Kennedy rightly notes, these movements embody a sensibility aligned with the "empathic mode" of child-rearing and the democratic social character, and can be seen as early expressions of a childist agenda within schooling (Biswas et al, 2023). However, their interventions remain primarily situated in specific Western contexts and are largely limited to pedagogical reform. This leaves open the question of how childism might be applied transnationally to restructure broader political economic systems. In particular, there is an urgent need to respond to contemporary adultist injustices—such as intergenerational climate injustice—where neoliberal economies depend on education systems to reproduce human capital, often without regard for children's lived realities or future wellbeing.

6. Implications for practice and conclusions

The introduction of "Bleak Pedagogy" as a critical concept invites educators, policymakers, and researchers to reflect on the long-term consequences of authoritarian practices, not only on children but also on adults themselves. By framing these methods within a social constructionist perspective, the authors advocate moving beyond binary judgments of "good" or "bad" pedagogies and, consequently, simplistic labels of "good" or "bad" teachers, fathers, or mothers. Instead, the focus shifts towards understanding how cultural norms perpetuate these practices and identifying pathways for systemic change, fostering a meeting point between adult and children's cultures to the benefit of both.

Practical implications include the development of training programs for educators and teachers that prioritize relational and empathetic approaches, alongside policy reforms aimed at embedding frameworks inclusive of children's and adolescents' cultures into educational systems. These steps

are essential for fostering environments that respect children's rights and support their holistic development.

Adultcentrism's influence extends beyond interpersonal dynamics, shaping educational systems and institutional practices in profound ways. Within this framework, the concept of "Bleak Pedagogy" represents a significant step forward in understanding the far-reaching impacts of exacerbated adultcentric bias. By exposing the limitations of authoritarian practices and advocating for relational and genuinely inclusive approaches to adult-child relationships, this research offers a roadmap for transformative change. Integrating the perspective of childism as a lens for reimagining these dynamics could provide an essential foundation for restructuring educational *and* political economic systems to prioritize mutual respect, equity, and growth for all generations.

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