



ADULTIFICATION AS EPISTEMIC VIOLENCE

DECOLORISING EDUCATIONAL RESPONSES TO BLACK AND BROWN YOUTH

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PURPOSE OF THIS SESSION



To critically examine
adultification as a form of
epistemic violence



To focus on responsibilities
and practices within
Higher Education



This session is staff-led and
does NOT involve student
collaboration

- This session does not involve formal student collaboration.
- This is a deliberate ethical and pedagogical decision at this stage of the work.
- While student partnership remains central to my wider research agenda, time constraints and the final stages of my PhD did not allow this to be engaged with in the depth it deserves.
- Anonymised student voices from a recent lecture discussion are included illustratively.
- The primary focus therefore remains on how educational institutions produce misrecognition through routine practices, policies, and professional judgement.

DEFINING ADULTIFICATION

“Black children are often denied the presumption of innocence routinely afforded to their white peers.”

— Joseph-Salisbury (2018)

Adultification refers to the racialised process through which black and brown children and young people are perceived as older, less innocent and more responsible for their behaviour than their white peers.

Within education, adultification reduces access to care, flexibility, and empathy, while simultaneously increasing surveillance, discipline, and moral judgement.

WHY ADULTIFICATION MATTERS FOR EDUCATORS

Adultification helps explain why similar behaviours are interpreted differently depending on race.

For educators and leaders, recognising adultification is essential to understanding disparities in discipline, student engagement, continuation, and attainment across the educational lifecourse.

EARLY ESCALATION IN SCHOOLS: EXCLUSIONS

- Department for education data shows that disciplinary escalation begins early.
- **Permanent exclusion rates per 100 pupils in England:**
 - Black Caribbean pupils: 0.18
 - White British pupils: 0.13
- These disparities point to unequal interpretation of behaviour rather than differences in conduct alone.

ROUTINE DISCIPLINE: SUSPENSIONS

❑ Suspension Data Reveals How Adultification Operates Through Everyday Disciplinary Practices.

❑ Suspension Rates (England):

Caribbean Pupils: 9.11

Any Other White Background: 6.52

Suspensions Often Represent The First Formal Labelling Of Children As Disruptive Or Problematic.

ADULTIFICATION DOES NOT ACT ALONE

- Adultification often intersects with other structural factors that shape how students are read and responded to.
- These include late or missed identification of neurodivergence, particularly among black and brown students, where behaviours associated with difference are misread as rudeness, disengagement, or defiance.
- Language also plays a role. Where English is not the primary language spoken in the home, fragmented understanding may be interpreted as lack of effort rather than as a learning need.
- In these contexts, adultification compounds existing barriers, turning unmet need into perceived behavioural or academic failure.

FROM SCHOOL TO FURTHER EDUCATION

- As students move into further education, earlier patterns of adultification are often intensified.
- Behavioural surveillance increases, pastoral support decreases, and responsibility is placed on students to self-manage within systems that have historically misrecognised their needs.

STUDENTS LEAVING HIGHER EDUCATION

- Office for students (2023) data shows continued racial disparity in continuation rates.
- Continuation rates in England:
 - Black students: 85.0%
 - White students: 89.3%
- Leaving higher education is frequently framed as individual failure rather than as the outcome of cumulative misrecognition.

UNIVERSITY AWARDING GAP

- Differences in degree outcomes further demonstrate the long-term impact of adultification.
- Good degree (first/2:1) outcomes:

Black students: 60.6%

White students: 81.0%

This 20.4 percentage point gap reflects structural processes rather than academic ability.

Office for Students (2024). *Degree outcomes by ethnicity: 2022–23.*
UK higher education providers in England.

WHY HIGHER EDUCATION IS A CRITICAL SITE

- Higher education is often the final institutional space where adultification can be interrupted.
- However, through assessment practices, safeguarding procedures, and expectations of professionalism, he can also reproduce earlier harms if adultification goes unrecognised.

STUDENT EXPERIENCES OF MISRECOGNITION

In discussions about adultification, students described being framed as problematic rather than supported:

- “I was always labelled as a problem, even when I didn’t understand what was being asked.”
- “Teachers assumed I was being difficult, but I was just confused.”
- “It felt like they had already decided who I was before I spoke.”

These reflections illustrate how confusion and unmet need are often misread as behavioural failure.

WHAT LECTURERS CAN DO DIFFERENTLY

- Addressing adultification requires changes in everyday academic practice, not just policy statements.
- Lecturers can begin by:
 - Pausing judgement when interpreting behaviour, tone, or silence
 - Distinguishing confusion from disengagement
 - Recognising that late-diagnosed neurodiversity may shape participation and assessment
 - Being attentive to how language, accent, or communication style is interpreted
 - Building flexibility and clarity into teaching materials and assessment guidance
- These are not reductions in academic standards, but shifts in interpretation that can significantly reduce harm.

IMPLICATIONS FOR ORGANISATIONS AND EDUCATORS

- Addressing adultification requires institutions to critically reflect on how behaviour, tone and engagement are interpreted.
- This includes adjusting curriculum language, assessment expectations and support structures, and prioritising care and understanding over escalation and punishment.

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