



Adulthood, Intergenerational Solidarity, and *The Tantrum that Saved the World*

Nick Kleese, University of Minnesota-Twin Cities, Minnesota, USA

Abstract

Climate literacy education endeavors to prepare young people to live well in a climate changing world. Presumably this is also the aim of literature for young people *about* the climate crisis, especially of books including depictions of youth activists. What interests drive these narratives? How adult perceptions of young people shape our relationship with both the texts and the young people with whom we work? Drawing examples from actual youth activists and *The Tantrum that Saved the World*, I suggest that checking our own potential adulthood will help educators work more effectively with young people.

Keywords

Adulthood, intergenerational solidarity, youth climate movement, coalition-building

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Framing

Climate literacy education endeavors to prepare young people to live well in a climate changing world. This also appears to be the aim of many stories, particularly literature in what one might call the “changemaker” sub-genre: portraits of young climate activists, real and fictional, promising young readers that they, too, are “old enough to save the planet” (Kirby, 2020). Collectively, these narratives reinforce a dictum: in young people we trust.

There’s power in these narratives. Their abundance, however, has transformed the idea of the young activist into a trope. Something tricky is at work here—what drives adult interest in the trope? What do we imagine when we invoke *young* people? How does this imagination shape our work, as adults, in climate literacy education?

The answer has something to do with the ways in which adultist biases frame our sense of the world. By interrogating our adult perspective, we might be better positioned to work *with* young people (cf. Gubar, 2016) towards an ecological future. The first step, I propose, is to grapple with adultism.

Adultism

Adultism—also called aetnormativity—is the bias that values adult ways of knowing and being in the world over those of young people. Scholars writing in English trace the origin of the concept to youth work (Flasher, 1978), which spread to political science (Lau, 2012; Moosa-Mitha, 2005; Olsson, 2008), education (Bertrand, Brooks, and Domínguez, 2023), and other social sciences (Biswas and Wall, 2023). My sense is that the study of adultism is more established beyond the United States, not merely because ours is only one of two nations to not ratify the United Nations’ Convention Rights of the Child (Blanchfield, 2015). As such, I offer this overview with humility.

Adultism exists in part because humans are socialized into particular social practices and values deemed “adult” or “mature”. These practices and values are myriad (cf. Wall, 2025), so here I propose five that I find particularly relevant:

- 1) respecting procedures, which demands patience
- 2) overvaluing logic, which demands “regulating” emotions
- 3) separating public and private life, which demands dissonance
- 4) accepting “the way things are”, which demands forfeiting agency, and
- 5) championing “realism” over “idealism”, which demands sacrificing creativity and imagination.

Note that these practices and values are also aligned with several other dominant ways of being in the world: white, male, able-bodied, middle-class, etc. When these dominant values are equated with “maturity,” the notion of “youth” can be weaponized to “depriv[e] others of political agency on the basis of their emotional or civilizational immaturity” (Devji, 2021, p. 222; Bernstein, 2011).

Adultism as a Structural Bias

Like other biases, adultism is structural in that our shared social institutions are *structured* to discriminate against young people. The most obvious example is the political system (Wall, 2023). While nearly all political decisions impact young people, no person below a specific threshold age has an official say in those decisions. In the United States, young people cannot vote until they are eighteen. Why eighteen? It is not as if, at midnight on their eighteenth birthday, teens are magically endowed with the capacities to vote (Olsson, 2008). Moreover, any other criteria used to determine eligibility—such as ill-defined notions of capacity, knowledge, or reason—cannot be applied to young people, as a bloc, without also disenfranchising a significant portion of the adult population (ibid).

The institution of education is adultist too. Scholars occasionally address this by calling to involve young people more directly in curriculum-making processes (Steinberg & Down, 2020). That’s said, American classroom teachers are *required* to teach particular content via learning or content area standards. Their jobs depend on it. While educators can involve students in some decisions, these inevitably fall short of the structural realignment that adult allies would like to see.

Still, we can resist adultism in other ways. We can learn to identify the bias, and we can do so in tandem with young people. Reading critically and intentionally is one avenue for doing so. *The Tantrum that Saved the World* (2022) is a particularly generative text for such an analysis. The narrative depicts Sophia, whose life is upended with the arrival of interspecies climate refugees. Her initial consternation eventually turns into activism, but adultist bureaucrats stymie her advocacy. Eventually, Sophia embraces her anger and builds a movement, ultimately visiting the White House. While the narrative lends itself to considering structural adultism, it is even more generative for considering interpersonal aspects of the bias.

Adulthood as Interpersonal Bias: Four Manifestations

Denying Youth the Capacity for Action

The most flagrant form of adulthood is the refusal to see young people as capable of contributing to society. This tends to be a conservative position, evident in the right-wing backlash against youth climate protests (Zraick, 2021), but this isn't limited to the right. As California Democratic Senator Diane Feinstein infamously told youth climate activists: "I know what I'm doing," she scolded. "You come in here, and you say, 'It has to be my way or the highway.' I don't respond to that" (Democracy Now!, 2019, n.p.). Still, adultist denial isn't always so militant. Greta Thunberg faced a more paternal version of this when she met with politicians during her 2019 trip to the United States. "I urge [the politicians] to listen to the science and act now before it's too late," she wrote in the diary she kept at the time. "They say that they think it's so amazing that I'm so active and committed, and that when I grow up I too can become a politician and make a real difference in the world" (2020, n.p.)—an example of adult proceduralism *par excellence*.

This dynamic is a key plot element in *Tantrum*. Determined to help her recently arrived friends, Sophia drafts a petition and marches to city hall. There, a middle-aged man in a suit cautions her to be patient: "Take a number and wait, if you please" (opening 10). Later, when she returns with more aggressive messaging, the same man tells her that she's too "sentimental" and "too young to grasp all the issues at hand" (opening 14). This second denial proves to be the catalyst for Sophia's anger, which ultimately leads to successful action (Osgood & de Rijke, 2022).

Protecting "Innocence"

The second common adulthood is the desire to protect the "innocence" of youth. While well-intentioned, this stance sequesters young people, preventing them from practicing the holistic responses required to effectively navigate the world (García-González, 2025). Moreover, "innocence" is often used as a political Trojan Horse for nefarious ends. Amid the increasing frequency and mortality of school shootings, for example, the Gun Owners of America have argued that because "our children need protection—the real solution is to arm teachers" (2023, n.p.). Educators know this debate better than most. Political calls to "protect children" via book bans and curriculum debates have never been more intense.

In *Tantrum*, notions of childhood innocence are less immediately evident than outright rejection of youth capacity. Still, readers might conceptualize Sophia's change of heart, early in the narrative, as a result of her exposure to climate crisis impacts. In an

attempt to maintain her sheltered life, Sophia self-sequesters in her own room (opening 7), before realizing the need to act. This arc would seem to critique notions of innocence, but the narrative's dynamic is more complicated than that. Despite Sophia's rejection of innocence, the book does not show the floods or heatwaves that brought the refugees to Sophia's door. The "challenging" aspects are left to the imagination. In this omission, the narrative *insists* on innocence by opting not to depict the actual impacts, despite the ubiquity of these depictions in the news and on social media—all of which are readily available to children themselves.

Tokenizing Youth Voice

Educators are also privy to calls to "hear children's voices" (cf. Popoola, Sivers, and McDonagh, 2026). Of course, young people should have opportunities to express themselves; the trouble is that (2020) decries "the privileging of voice as the definitive form of political agency" has sidelined other possibilities for agency (Steinberg and Down, 2020, p. 4). Nor is "voice" socioculturally neutral. Not all young people are equally practiced at expressing themselves verbally, let alone practiced at the particular modalities of expression that adults value (e.g. calm, logical, "polite"). These discriminatory values become all the more pronounced when they are considered intersectionally.

Herein is the most complicated element of *Tantrum's* narrative. The narrative's faith in youth voice is of a particular kind of youth voice: in this case, shaped by middle-class notions of propriety. Even Sophia's anger, which boils over in the climactic full page spread, is rendered in beautiful colors (opening 16). On one hand, the narrative makes clear that communication is a central component of coalition building. At the same time, the narrative suggests that knowing the facts of the crisis is, alone, enough. We know better by now.

Abdicating Adult Responsibility

The fourth form of adultism is the sneakiest. It is also the most relevant for this journal's audience. In rejecting adultist biases, we risk overcorrection and investing young people with all our hope for the future. In doing so, adult allies ignore three key considerations: 1) their own adult responsibility to contribute to change, 2) the diversity of positions within youth as a political bloc, including power differentials, and 3) that they, too, have capacities that compliment young peoples' (Deszcz-Tryhubczak and Jaques, 2021). Adult educators have years of training in pedagogy, deep knowledge of developmentally aligned curriculum, and years of experience navigating education's administrative bureaucracy.

Although *Tantrum* grants young people the capacities to make change, it does not afford opportunities to consider how young people might work *with* adults to leverage their sociopolitical power as a form of intergenerational solidarity. The adults depicted in the story are passive (Sophia's adult students), refugees (whose depicted passivity problematic in and of itself), or bureaucrats who hinder action. Responding well to the crisis requires all of us, and so I wonder: how would Sophia's movement change if, say, a supportive teacher was included in the plot?

Intergenerational Collectivism

Tantrum offers readers a chance to see how one might adopt a child-oriented, or childist position (Biswas and Wall, 2023) to counter adultist biases—and for the sake of the planet. Yet *Tantrum*'s emphasis remains on an individual. At best, and despite glimpses at depicting collectivism, *Tantrum* falls short of imagining the processes of coalition-building required to make substantive change; at worst, it balkanizes the movement into charismatic leaders who are in the know, and followers who are to be led. If the ecological future we want is to be egalitarian and just—including intra- and intergenerationally—then we will need to learn to see protagonists, real or fictional, no matter their age, as agents within a larger collective of agents, learning from and regarding one another as capable kin.

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