



# Letting Teach: Gen Z as Socio-Political Educators in an Overheated World

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In this article, the author begins by grasping the present crisis through the social anthropological description of *overheating*. She then locates “Generation Z (Gen Z)” as a generation born into an overheated era and distinguishes their socio-political struggle for intergenerational climate justice from preceding generations. Following that, the author presents an analysis of the oppressive adultist dimensions of the challenges confronted by Gen Z activists like Greta Thunberg. She does so by engaging with examples from the German context. The objective of the discussion on adultism faced by Gen Z activists consequently establishes that young activists demonstrate relentless courage and hence their contribution deserves a legitimate place in rethinking socio-political “education.” Her reading reveals that young activists are simultaneously resisting adult opposition and contributing to educating older generations about the intergenerational dimensions of the climate crisis. Therefrom, the author proposes that one may re-think the matter at hand from a childist standpoint which implies a re-cognition of pupils’ agency within education i.e., intergenerational relating, as something that adults can also learn from. She suggests that an integral dimension of reflexivity in further developing childist educational theory and praxis, entails a conscious commitment to *letting* children and youth teach adult educators too.

**Keywords:** childism, adultism, philosophy of pedagogy, socio-political education, overheating, intergenerational justice, Greta Thunberg, Fridays for Future

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## INTRODUCTION

There seems to be a mainstream tendency in educational theory and praxis to take for granted that “education for change” or “changing education” implies adults educating children and youth differently. To do so, much focus is placed on curriculum design, curriculum content, teacher training, and so on. However, most educational scholars and practitioners do not easily recognize or acknowledge that children and youth are active agents who also contribute to new knowledge and learning processes of older generations. In other words, educational scholars and practitioners tend to assume that children are *default addressees of pedagogy* and must invariably *be taught* by adults, but such an assumption misses out on the contributions that children and youth can and do make to the development of adult lifespans and adult-led communities. This includes critical works about civic education that criticize the “Western” psychological models and focus on fostering agency in children through education (e.g., Haste, 2004). Similarly, this also includes discussions that highlight the importance of equal treatment of pupils in schools in order to foster democratic attitudes (e.g., Apple and Beane, 2007). Even

these alternative approaches seem to implicitly treat the figure of the child as the “default addressee of pedagogy.” Theoretical accounts of childist understandings of political participation (e.g., Moosa-Mitha, 2005; Lister, 2007; Wall, 2012; Sundhall, 2017; Bray and Nakata, 2020) have also not yet been discussed as part of relatively comprehensive theoretical overviews on citizenship education (e.g., Ribeiro et al., 2017). The difference is that childist understandings underscore the roles that child-adult power dynamics play in the normative fabric of democratic society, as well as endeavor to imagine how democracy can be transformed to include children.

Young climate activists across the globe, who are fighting for intergenerational climate justice through climate litigation cases, youth alliances and school strikes in local and global contexts critique the assumption that children must always “be taught.” Instead, there is a case to be made that their example offers a possibility for adults and adultist societies to learn from. Research on the German context shows that young activists are emerging as a strong influence on increasing socio-political awareness regarding the climate crisis in their societies (Wahlström et al., 2019; Bergmann and Ossewaarde, 2020; de Moor et al., 2020; Haunss and Sommer, 2020; Mattheis, 2020; Meade, 2020). Their activism, which includes deliberately excluding themselves from the spacio-temporality of schools to protest on streets every Friday, has been met with vehement political opposition (Bergmann and Ossewaarde, 2020; Haunss and Sommer, 2020; Meade, 2020). In other words, young activists are simultaneously resisting adult opposition and contributing to educating older generations about the intergenerational dimensions of the climate crisis.

I grasp education as essentially an intergenerational relating that is not limited to an infrastructure called “school.” There is no doubt that adult educators have a lot to teach children about socio-political participation, but in purview of the aforementioned critical socio-political responses of young climate justice activists I propose asking—how may adult educators *let* children and youth *teach* them about socio-political participation in face of the contemporary overheating crisis?

In what follows, I begin by grasping the present crisis through the social anthropological description of *overheating*. I then locate Generation Z (Gen Z) as a generation born into an overheated era and distinguish their socio-political struggle for intergenerational climate justice from preceding generations. After that, I present an analysis of the oppressive adultist dimensions of the challenges confronted by Gen Z activists like Greta Thunberg. I do so by engaging with examples from the German context, although I do not assert that adultism is exclusively a “German society problem.” The objective of a discussion on adultism faced by Gen Z activists is to establish that—they demonstrate relentless courage and hence their contribution deserves a legitimate place in rethinking socio-political education. Next, I propose that one may re-think the matter at hand from a childist standpoint which enables a recognition of pupils’ agency within intergenerational relating as something that adults can also learn from. I suggest that an integral dimension of reflexivity in childist educational theory

and practice, both within and beyond the walls of schooling, must entail a conscious commitment to *letting* children and youth teach adult educators too.

## GEN Z IN AN OVERHEATED WORLD

The contemporary planetary crisis has been described by anthropologist Thomas Hylland Eriksen as—overheating—and refers to “Anthropocene neoliberalism” as a compounded phenomenon, which is not limited to the environmental crisis alone, but is deeply intertwined with neoliberal economic activity aimed at growth with no upper limit, and socio-cultural tensions as well (Eriksen, 2016). Another way of understanding this anthropological description is that it is a period of acceleration of acceleration. Speed and heat being interdependent—the complexity is rendered graspable through the metaphorical term—overheating. The first fact about such an era is accelerated growth at an accelerated temporal speed—be it population, economy, machine assisted human activities including digital connectivity, mobility of goods and people, urban expansion, energy consumption, waste production, and so on. Eriksen further emphasizes the asymmetrical nature of overheating in so far as formerly colonized parts of the world pay higher existential costs to maintain standards of living elsewhere. All of which is essentially enabled through a fossil-fuel-generated civilization leading to the central double bind of this era i.e., achieving a balance between environmental sustainability and economic growth. As to the question of when does overheating start, Eriksen proposes the start of the 1990s which was particularly characterized by a massive deregulation of economy. This periodization also makes the overheating worldview apt to situate and grasp the hypercomplex challenges inherited by persons born around 1995 onwards, commonly referred to as “Gen Z;” a generation that is born into an overheated era and now leading an unprecedented socio-political fight for intergenerational climate justice.

Gen Z has often been accused of being passive, preoccupied with their own selves and their digital devices, and social media (Spyrou, 2020). However, using connective action as form of participation to overcome their marginalization through global-scale activism, they reveal a side of their life-trajectories as future-makers who are willing to take the lead, to fight and reclaim their futures from adults and imagine it differently (Spyrou, 2020). It is not as though this is the first generation where young activists take lead in the fight for intergenerational climate justice. At the UN Earth Summit, Rio de Janeiro in 1992, 12-year-old Severn Cullis-Suzuki addressed adults regarding their (ir)responsibility in terms of failing to protect the planet’s ecological balance for children and future generations (Cullis-Suzuki, 2017). Cullis-Suzuki began her activism career at the age of 9 years by founding the Environmental Children’s Organization (ECO). What distinguishes the scope and impact of her activism from that of Gen Z is that she did not have access to a global digital connectivity like them, nor had the climate crisis received international political commitment for action e.g., through the Paris Agreement 2016.

The last 3 years especially have seen a rise in appeals from Gen Z for intergenerational climate justice across the globe using multiple channels. One prominent channel is the use of international legal instruments like United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) and European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR), to pursue litigation against governments for failing to secure the best interests of children and future generations. For example, following the 2017 forest fires in Leiria district of Portugal, directly affected plaintiffs between ages 5 and 14 years, represented by British environmental lawyers, launched a crowdfunding campaign to finally sue 33 European countries for increasing global carbon emissions earlier this earlier (Young, 2020). Other prominent examples of rights-based legal actions are cases such as: Juliana vs. United States 2015, Ridhima Pandey vs. India 2017, Sacchi et al. vs. Argentina et al. 2019, and Youth for Climate Justice vs. Austria et al. 2020 (conf. [www.climatecasechart.com](http://www.climatecasechart.com)). While all these cases are directed toward the goal of intergenerational climate justice, they are diverse in terms of the legal instruments, frameworks, and arguments they use. In doing so, they have also employed legal instruments available to them in unique ways, opening the opportunity for international justice systems to use their discretion in previously unimaginable ways. For instance, the case Sacchi et al. vs. Argentina et al. 2019 filed by a transnational collective of 16 young climate activists including Greta Thunberg under the UNCRC, asserts that the climate crisis is a children's rights crisis. The plaintiffs assert that the sued countries i.e., Argentina, Brazil, France, Germany, and Turkey, due to their high carbon-emitting economic policies have violated the rights guaranteed to children by the UNCRC e.g., the right to life, health, prioritizing the best interest principle and cultural rights of petitioners from indigenous communities. The plaintiffs further assert that the gap between global children's rights ideals and implementation is so wide, that the children's rights of future generations will also be compromised. Although the UNCRC as an international legal instrument came into force in the year 1989 i.e., while activists like Cullis-Suzuki were working for similar goals by exposing adult (ir)responsibility, Gen Z activists seem to be more empowered and aware of rights-based legal instruments to mobilize them at such an unprecedented global scale as part of their activism.

Other channels through which Gen Z activists are pursuing for their fight are e.g., forming international youth alliances, social media campaigns, demand for climate emergency education (conf. English Climate Emergency Education Bill), and school strikes for climate—which within 2 years accelerated into the successful #Fridaysforfuture movement initiated in Sweden by Greta Thunberg. In August 2018, Greta Thunberg in her capacity as a 15-year-old Swedish citizen, took on a politically motivated defiance of school attendance to demand that her government complies with the goals of the Paris Agreement (conf. Thunberg, 2019; Thunberg et al., 2019). Her act of civil disobedience resonated and attracted massive support by various young climate activist groups led by youth like Luisa Neubauer in Germany, Anuna De Wever in Belgium, and so on. By 2019, kindergarten and school pupils—accompanied by their adult guardians and empathizers across continents—began striking

school regularly (Holmberg and Alvinus, 2020). After the global deep strike on 15th March 2019, UN General Secretary Antonio Guterres admitted that his generation had failed to respond properly to the challenge of climate change (Guterres, 2019). By March 2020, in face of the global COVID-19 pandemic and global lockdowns, protestors did not stop (Haunss and Sommer, 2020). They simply moved online embracing new forms of digital protesting *via* social media; forms that young activists of the preceding generation of Cullis-Suzuki did not have access to.

#FridaysforFuture is neither the first, nor the sole instance of school strikes aimed at socio-political reform e.g., school strikes have targeted corporal punishment in Germany in 1918 (Weipert, 2015). Politically motivated defiance of school attendance is also an important part of the Hong Kong democracy movement, where protestors simultaneously boycott and “paralyze” educational institutions (Kuo, 2019). “School walkouts” were used by pupils in the USA to protest gun laws after a mass school shooting in the year 2018 (ABC News, 2018). In Chile, school strikes were used to protest restrictions on civil liberties and neoliberal reductions of social welfare (Cuffe, 2019). The tradition of effective organizing for educational and social reform through school strikes is a feature of resistance in Latin America e.g., the Chilean Penguin Revolution which mobilized 800,000 pupils at its peak in 2006 or Brazilian school strikes in 2015 (Cozzareli, 2015). School strikes have also constituted anti-colonial resistance, e.g., during the South African Soweto uprising of 1976 (South African History Online, 2013). However, the #FridaysforFuture movement distinguishes itself because it reflects the central feature of the overheated era which is accelerated global connectivity growing at an unprecedented scale and pace, that has worked in its favor. In turn #FridaysforFuture demonstrates a novel level of socio-political influence (Wahlström et al., 2019; de Moor et al., 2020; Haunss and Sommer, 2020; Holmberg and Alvinus, 2020). This also makes Gen Z the first to engage large scale, decentralized “connective” action (as opposed to conventional “collective” action, conf. Bennett and Segerberg, 2013).

A strong kinship of activist argumentation that is shared by young climate activists of previous generations like Cullis-Suzuki and Gen Z activists is not only the appeal to intergenerational climate justice, but also very specifically—calling out adults who according to Gen Z activists demonstrate short-sighted hypocrisy despite knowing that consumption and economic profit-driven lifestyles are not ecologically sustainable and only possible by using up resources of future generations. For example, during the early phases of global school strikes in September 2018, when school students in Norwegian cities demanded more responsible handling of fossil fuels, they used banners depicting their Prime Minister Erna Solberg setting planet Earth on fire (Randøy, 2018).

The commitments of the Paris Agreement 2016 were to respond to the red flags waved by the world's leading natural scientists. While the central demand of the movement is to pressure governments to stick to the goals of the Paris Agreement 2016—Gen Z activists strike and argue from a profound philosophical ground of intergenerational relationality, which at its heart pierces the question of education (e.g., Straume, 2018; Su and Su, 2019). Educational philosophers like Straume (2018)

and Su and Su (2019) problematize the paradox that current adult educators must exercise responsibility while enabling children to become part of a resource-intensive capitalism that depletes its own support systems. Others like Biswas and Mattheis (2021) take a childist stance and propose that educational praxis should recognize the educational contributions of children in the lives of adult educators because pupils' activism and advocacy itself contributes to informal education of adults regarding the climate crisis.

Schools and as a corollary—educational systems—are consequently emerging as important sites of intergenerational democratic tensions (Holmberg and Alvinus, 2020). At the same time, they are revealing novel forms of resistance that were previously unknown to adult educators (Holmberg and Alvinus, 2020). The challenge then is not about teaching democratic participation, that they cannot actually practice e.g., voting. Nor is the challenge about creating democratic experiences with the confines of school walls (e.g., Apple and Beane, 2007). It is rather teaching a form of informal connective democratic participation (that comes in part as critical response to democratic marginalization) that one has themselves never practiced. Furthermore, a form that can only be practiced because one is in a marginalized position, that the teacher herself will not be in. To state the obvious, neither have present generation of teachers turned to school strikes for seeking intergenerational climate justice, nor have they (even as voting adults) managed the scale of socio-political influence as observed in the #FridaysforFuture movement (conf. Wahlström et al., 2019; de Moor et al., 2020; Haunss and Sommer, 2020; Holmberg and Alvinus, 2020). I will discuss this dimension as offering a pertinent opportunity to approach socio-political democratic education later in this article. The step I will take before that in the next section is to present the challenges and adultist oppression faced by the young activists in order to establish that the relentless courage demonstrated by them deserves a legitimate place in re-thinking socio-political education.

## UNEARTHING DEEP-ROOTED SOCIO-POLITICAL ADULTISM

On the one hand, Gen Z school strikes for climate have been supported publicly praised by adults and from sister movements such as Scientists for Future, Teachers for Future, and so on. On the other hand, they have been fiercely criticized for the content and the form of striking school itself. Even though Thunberg and fellow protestors have persuasively rejected many of the objections, worries, and allegations, many of the assumptions underlying these popular judgements about their activism and advocacy linger in the popular debate (Meade, 2020: p. 90–107). I characterize these tendencies as adultism and will particularly engage with tendencies in German reporting and political reactions to Thunberg's activism building on Meade's analysis (2020) to illustrate adultist responses that Gen Z activists confront. In doing so, I do not intend to show a "German society" problem, rather I engage with the particularities of Meade's analysis because it offers a valuable insight to grasp the broader

tendency of adultism which surfaced in reactions to the school strikes for climate across the globe.

The term adultism was introduced in the United States of America as a psychological concept by Flascher (1978) but is also developed by scholars in the fields of child and youth studies in other contexts. Liebel (2020) offers an examination of overt and covert, individual and structural symptoms he identifies as adultist discrimination. Bonnardel (2015) advocates for broadening emancipatory horizons by denouncing infantilization of children in family and educational institutions due to their socio-political status as "minors." Pease, 2021 remarks that it is necessary to conceptually distinguish age-based discrimination as experienced by children and youth as opposed to that experienced by the elderly because these varieties of ageism are constituted in substantially different ways. Through these works, one may define adultism as underlying processes of social discrimination, power, and domination relations between "beings" (adults) and "becomings" (children and youth). The need to differentiate the "adult-self" from the "child-other" seems so pronounced that children are often perceived as a separate species to gain power over them and perpetuate injustice. Liebel (2020) presents various examples from various national contexts to argue that if children and youth find the necessary solidarity and support, they find ways to confront adultist oppression and marginalization. With respect to the disciplinary oppression faced by young climate activists especially in the Global North, Mattheis (2020) makes a case for justifying civil disobedience as a democratic value that applies strongly to children due to their unjust exclusion from formal democracy. The author provides an "argument from exclusion" in presenting children's civil disobedience for climate justice, as a pertinent response to formal exclusion which calls for a lenient engagement on part of adult-led institutions where they are placed. Hard opposition to even the idea of children, in their institutional roles as pupils, going on strikes were met with highly adultist reactions.

Some prominent adultist tendencies are exposed in the reactions to school strikes for climate by Meade (2020), who lays out the following a ten-point analytical categorization of adultism which includes infantilization, power and subordination, denying agency, undermining competence, paternalism, defamation and malice, and so on. Drawing upon protest researcher Dieter Rucht's remarks that Thunberg was infantilized insofar as her political capacity itself was denied due to her age, Meade describes this form of infantilization as adultism (Meade, 2020: p. 90). Consequently, Thunberg and fellow protestors were not trusted as taking political action by opponents. Thunberg and fellow activists further challenge the common European bourgeois construct of childhood as an unconcerned life-phase. Similarly, constructs of adolescents as a politically disenchanted group pursuing instant gratification are dispensed with. Thunberg and fellow activists claimed discursive power through media which does not fit into the adultist worldview, wherein children usually do not set the tone. Instead of succumbing to a subordinated and powerless political position, the strikes successfully accelerated discussions on climate policy. The German Chancellor Angela Merkel, for



instance admitted that the seriousness of the movement drove her government's climate policy to accelerate and to adopt a more decisive approach (Merkel, 2019, in Meade, 2020: p. 108). Such power, according to Meade stirs up adultist fears and in turn provokes a subordinate imagination of Thunberg as a helpless, exploited girl. The infantilization that Thunberg successfully challenges relates to a core adultist bias that ideas for political action can only come from adults. She also successfully reversed roles by exposing the insincerity of adult affirmations and explanations of climate change, as seen in her assertion, "You're not mature enough to phrase it [i.e., the climate crisis] that way. You even leave this burden to us children" (Thunberg, 2019: p. 15).

In complementary contrast, the bias extends to include the beliefs that children (1) are necessarily controlled by other adults, (2) may have no opinion of their own, (3) can be manipulated and easily convinced by adults. Thunberg has persistently been termed a "PR-Marionette" (a puppet for public relations) in Germany. The constant accusations of manipulation were met by several justifications and explanations from Thunberg. For example, she described how she wrote her speeches and only had them checked by trusted climatologists. A double standard pointed out in this regard is that most politicians have their speeches drafted by professional speechwriters. By the very virtue of being adult though, they do not need to justify that speeches do in fact represent their own views.

It is particularly significant for educational scholarship that schooling, and education have been at the forefront of adultist resistance toward Gen Z climate activists. For instance, politicians successfully derailed the discourse from the actual core topic by focusing on compulsory education or obligatory schooling which is a legally binding duty of children in Germany. A range of adult strategies to silence the insurgence by objecting on grounds of "education" and "schooling" are observed by Meade (2020: p. 95). Harsh reactions to breaches of compulsory schooling law (German: *Schulpflicht*) were attributed to the fact that pupils deliberately leave the protective, "learning space" purposefully designed for and allocated to them by adults. Hardliners, like the Education Minister of the federal state North Rhine-Westphalia, Yvonne Gebauer, described the school strikes for climate as "fundamentally inadmissible" and urged school administrators to take strict disciplinary action (dpa/World, 2019, in Meade, 2020: p. 95). The federal state's Minister President Armin Laschet proposed that it would be "more credible if the pupils were to gather together after school" (Ullrich, 2019, in Meade, p. 95). Neither did such responses sufficiently take the socio-political motivations and interests of Generation Z protestors into account, nor did they seem to comprehend that "strikes" if undertaken after school hours cease to be "strikes." Strikers' consistent response has been to raise questions such as

"Why study for a future, which may not be there?"

"Why should we study so we can do great things later, when the time for greatness, for action, is now?" "Why spend a lot of effort to become educated, when our governments are not listening to the educated?" (Fridays for Future, n.d.).

Further adultist responses demoted the strike to an educational mission of personal development, instead of encouraging pupils in their concrete climate policy concerns. Such responses included politicians and political authorities recommending strict punishments e.g., after-school detention hours by justifying that it would help pupils to reflect on their motivations, and/or it is a way of "taking protesters seriously." Pupils were thereby thrust back into the "learning space"—called school—allocated to them.

Thunberg and fellow protesters also received straw man accusations of lacking professional competence and claiming to know something they had no idea about. However, the comprehension of all facts is not a prerequisite for democratic participation, neither for adults nor for young people. An adultist tendency of equating youth with innocence (and therefore lack of knowledge) and adulthood with experience (and therefore possessing knowledge) is employed here. Protesters challenge this stereotype. Firstly, because they do not claim to have professional knowledge, but they demand that politicians listen to professional scientists. Secondly, in case of the climate crisis (or larger overheating crisis as I have described), most persons regardless of age do not grasp the complex relationships. In this sense, there is a shared ignorance to be overcome across age-groups. School strikes for climate offer this possibility through their advocacy work. But even positive reception of the pupils' civil disobedience was not completely free of adultism in so far as they exhibited a high degree of paternalism. Opinion pieces in leading newspapers advised young protestors to learn from the experiences of their elders. Meade reads these forms of discourses as reflecting a tendency captured by the German proverb "Ratschläge sind auch Schläge (Advice are also beatings)" (Meade, 2020: p. 98). The adultist assumption found in both the straw man attacks as well as paternalistic advising is that only adulthood (equated with experience) can understand the complexity of the world.

School strikes for climate also reignited debates in German media regarding the abolition of compulsory school obligations questioning whether compulsory schooling is compatible with larger democratic ideals (Meade, 2020: p. 97). Positions in favor of abolition of compulsory schooling in Germany are based on a philosophical commitment to a world free of domination and adultism, in which there is more self-motivation to learn. School strikes for climate have gifted an impetus to a more democratic understanding of educational philosophy as commonly practiced in the German context. By way of *Reductio ad Absurdum* their primary slogan: "Why study for a future, which may not be there?" exposes—the absurdity of limiting the state's educational mandate to compulsory schooling. Moreover, by exiting designated "learning spaces" and appearing on public streets, protestors re-affirm an essential interconnectedness between education and democratic participation.

Well-meaning adultism also surfaces in what Liebel (2013: p. 73) terms the "Käseglocke Paradigma (Cheese-bell paradigm)." Liebel uses this metaphor to explain a protectionist variety of adultism. In its extreme form, protectionist adultism not only keeps children and youth away from sources of perceived dangers and harmful influences as determined by adults, it also blocks out children's and youth's participation in risk assessment to avoid

discussions about what could be dangerous, and how best to deal with hazards.

In cases, where the young figure modes of action out on their own and confront their guardians in order to claim their freedom to act, another complex layer of indirect adultism surfaces. Thunberg's civil disobedience and advocacy won her the public status of a media icon and an influencer. In turn, her powerful influential status also provoked extreme protectionist reactions and her public status was labeled "child abuse" (Meade, 2020: p. 100). The extreme reactions extended to blaming Thunberg's adult guardians and supporters who were described as incapable of setting boundaries and using Thunberg's fear and panic caused by her "illness" to further their own political agenda. Here, the protectionist strain of adultism seems like yet another way of securing adult privilege when children's proactive participation becomes a perceived threat to normalized adult roles. In my reading, such a strain of adultism has a complex layer of disempowering the young *via* attacking liberal decisions of their liberal adult guardians.

Another reaction to the perceived threat of normalized adult roles has been counterattacks that appeared in forms of defamatory and malicious attacks e.g., the use of words such as "brat," "Kinderkram (kids' stuff)," or "Eco-Pippi" (referring to Pippi Longstocking, a fictitious child character by Swedish author Astrid Lindgren) or "Fridays for Lutscher (Lollypop-Lickers)." Pathologized descriptions e.g., "maladjusted," "mentally ill," "hysterical" or "psychotic," demonizing descriptions e.g., "fanatical," "anti-democratic," "extremist," "eco-terrorist," sarcastic descriptions e.g., "pursued by doomsday fantasies," "naive rebellion," "the poor, pitiful child" —also appeared in German media. Resentment of Thunberg's popularity was further expressed through descriptions such as "geltungssüchtig (validation seeking)," "Ego show," "the climate saint" or "Joan of Arc." Thunberg was described as a "mentally impaired Swedish truant and puppet in the hands of enterprising climate alarmists" (Meade, 2020: p. 102). Distortion in photomontages or informal art installations in public spaces also emerged, for example as seen in the **Figure 1** below documented in a parking lot in Brandenburg Berlin in August 2019. The "installation" depicts a skeleton wearing a wig like activist Thunberg's hairdo accompanied with a derogatory caption.

Further intersectional considerations of analysis in addition to age e.g., nationality, privileged social status, gender and disability add to discriminatory prejudices that Thunberg contested. On a broader note, protesters do not represent a homogenous group in either Europe or internationally. For example, most participants in the massive global protest on 15 March 2019 came from privileged educated classes with at least one parent with an academic degree (Wahlström et al., 2019; de Moor et al., 2020). The movement started in Europe but is now global. Although young voices from the African continent have addressed climate justice before, Thunberg's speeches seem to have had a stronger inspirational impact on young activists across the globe. While it is questioned why young white privileged activists receive higher media attention, compared to their counterparts from the global south, activists like Thunberg integrate an intersectional awareness of global asymmetry *from* their privileged position e.g., when Thunberg stated during a presentation in Sweden, "Because

how can we ask countries like India or Nigeria to take care of the climate crisis when we, who already have everything, don't care for it for a second..." (Thunberg, 2018). Here, Thunberg's use of her own intersectional privilege to evoke a sense of responsibility in an intersectionally privileged group of Swedish adult citizens is particularly noteworthy.

The vehement adultist reactions, that I have presented above along with examples of how Thunberg and fellow protesters successfully overcome these obstacles, demonstrate that children and youth can and do create their own political spaces and influence what counts as politically important. Given that Thunberg and fellow protesters must perpetually defend themselves and resist adultist hierarchy at multiple levels, further shows how their struggle is based on unequal premises. These examples also reveal how dynamics of manipulation and justification, the question of competence, good advice, and paternalism as well as paternalistic child protection, defamation and malice, generational conflict and generational justice, intersectionality and other axes of discrimination praise, appropriation, and relativization are inevitably intertwined.

All in all, the examples I have presented challenge adultist norms and oppression as a result of persistent and direct socio-political engagement on part of young activists. This now brings me to the next section, where I will propose that the socio-political struggle of Gen Z activists summons critical childist reflections on education, beyond schooling.

## ABSENT IN SCHOOL, PRESENT IN DEMOCRACY

Learning from how Gen Z protesters turn adultist discourses around by refusing to be addressed in a subordinate position, I appraise school strikes for climate as a call for childist thinking in how adult educators may comprehend the scope of socio-political education. The 2-fold reason I do so is firstly because school strikes for climate reveal that schools are no longer only a site for educating future citizens, but a site of political resistance and of exercising new forms of democratic participation of pupils as citizens in the present (Holmberg and Alvinus, 2020). Secondly, the adultist resistance to Gen Z protesters, that I have presented in the previous section, reveals what childist readings of children's political participation have already shown i.e., adulthood norms set limits on children's political participation (Sundhall, 2017). By childism here, I refer to a philosophically critical way of being, knowing and doing that emerges in the early 2000s as a result of the critical turn in the overlapping Anglo-Saxon and Scandinavian tradition of childhood studies, which very recently can be seen as crystalizing through a call for stronger relational ontologies from an intergenerational perspective (e.g., Wall, 2010, 2019; Spyrou, 2018; Spyrou et al., 2019; Biswas, 2020).

Regarding dominant Western models of citizenship education, Haste (2004) points to the need to go beyond teaching factual materials about institutions and instead focus on discursive processes that facilitate different practices. While the author does not explicitly discuss the subject through the inter-related lens of adultism and childism, the concluding appeal to the "need to find out how" resonates with approaches



**FIGURE 1** | Example of a malicious Anti-Greta installation documented by Brandenburg Berlin in August 2019. Image by interdisciplinary ethnologist Uli Beisel.

where the asymmetrical child-adult relationality is in focus. Bray and Nakata (2020) do so by capturing the way in which the abstract figure of “the child” occupies a constitutive role in democratic politics. Questions that are usually taken up within the educational contexts such as assessments of political “competencies” or legal contexts such as rights. This allows the authors to pursue a different realm of theoretical objectives to understand how the figure of the child is central to adults imagining political futures although children are “temporary outsiders” to democracy. Although children are formally excluded and placed in “schools” where they are taught about socio-political participation in the future, Bray and Nakata (2020) highlight the radical role of children in renewing democratic orders. The example of #FridaysforFuture reveals such a radical potential in practice and approaching it from a childist lens can be particularly useful in pursuing alternative theoretical objectives.

Childism means addressing children’s experiences by deconstructing and transforming social structures for all humans (Sundhall, 2017; Wall, 2019), and hence demands that adults must simultaneously allow themselves to be critically addressed by children (e.g., Biswas, 2020). Tools for deconstructing the naturalization of adulthood as Wall (2019) and Sundhall (2017) have argued are not provided by “childism” itself, rather examples such as Gen Z’s proactive socio-political participation through civil disobedience that enable adult childist theorists to further evolve tools for deconstruction and reconstruction of adultist norms, which in this paper I restrict to a discussion of socio-political education.

The examples of adult resistance that protestors like Thunberg confront, as I have discussed, also reveal that protestors re-affirm an essential interconnectedness between education and democratic participation by exiting designated learning spaces termed “schools” and appearing in digital and physical public spaces. Critical childist reflections on education, as essentially an intergenerational relationship, for example assert that, “Children may also act with a notion of improving not only their specific period of childhood but also their future lives as adults (or as parents), irrespective of how childhood is culturally defined at the time. And childhood, as it is socially defined, is always very future oriented in its nature, defined by, for example, the educational structure, as well as by systems for parent-child transfers of property. It is about nurturing (acting out) an identity, being, but also about transformative becoming—physically, emotionally, and intellectually—and sometimes with a claim on the future, a claim, as 16-year-old Greta Thunberg suggests, that is being denied by the current generation of adults. Not because children would like to become the adult “role models” they see around them but perhaps because they would like to claim a different world and a different future. It is interesting how Thunberg, in claiming a future endangered by the environmental crisis, acts in a realm defined by adults yet at the same time demands the right to a childhood, now denied her, as she is forced to act in lieu of the responsible politicians. Her critique of the adult world is expressed in terms sometimes used to describe children—adults are immature and irresponsible (Sandin, 2020: p. 1313).”



From a childist lens, education is essentially understood as an intergenerational relationship. While one need not be a childist in order to recognize education as an intergenerational relationship, a childist lens brings with it a nuance of *re-cognizing the agency of children* within this intergenerational relationship *as something that adults can also learn from*.

Spyrou (2020: p. 4), calls for a scholarship to “disclose new possible futures” for childhood studies through a more concerted effort “to explore the future as a legitimate theoretical and methodological concern and to take children as future-makers seriously.” As a childist philosopher of education, I hear this call as beckoning educational theorists and practitioners to take a rather progressive but necessary step i.e., to embrace an examination of how children’s active role in education as intergenerational community formation can be embraced. This is because as I have mentioned, “education” is an integral dimension of intergenerational relating. In turn, at the heart of community formation. Relatively privileged pupils who are choosing activism and advocacy are also performing an educational task for their communities that adult educators and “adultist” educational structures of instrumental schooling cannot do. Thus, my proposal to respond to the educational crisis of our overheated era is that the inseparable matter of childhood and (socio-political) education should advance in conjunction with the question: how may adult educators, adult-led educational institutions and economic sectors also learn from what children and youth can teach them?

Traditionally, it is the adults who are imagined as educators and children as learners. This imaginative assumption contrasts “experience” and “innocence” and extracts a hierarchical epistemological commitment upon which the global education sector rests. The epistemological commitment is of the form that: adults know, and children do not know. However, especially given the overheated cusp of socio-political and environmental change that we as a global community are standing at, we seem to rely on the adult epistemological authority where it can no longer stand because most adults (at least privileged/middle/upper class urban dwellers) do not know how to live, invest and govern in ways that enable future life on the planet itself. How then shall they be expected to “teach” for a “future?” I write this because one of the central questions asked by the most privileged young protestors on the planet is “Why study for a Future if there is no Future?” At the same time, as I have presented in the former section, the young protestors are playing a significant role in educating older generations about the crisis as well as changing lifestyle and socio-political sens-ability so that future generations can enjoy the “right to life” itself. Currently, we are at a point where “intergenerationality” itself is so perversely broken, that we live and make money off resources of future generations and at the same time we will be leaving behind a lot for them to clean up. For instance, in the German-speaking lifeworld, one now comes across the word “Ewigkeitskosten” which may be translated as “eternal costs.” This term is coined in relation to the shutdown of the coal industry and is applied to costs that follow the shutdown of mines. It may also be applied to other mining industries that have sustained industrial growth over the past century. The idea of “eternal costs” can be stretched to grasp costs

beyond perpetual material costs and burdens that the present and future generations will inherit. Owing to the colonial legacy, the eternal burden will be unequally distributed for young persons in the south and in the north.

The variety of instrumentalized schooling as we know today is part of the modern industrialization project (made possible by a colonial history, conf., Loomba, 2005) and took children out of community forming socio-economic processes (conf., Qvortrup, 2001). A telling example of structural relationship is evident in the following utterance of the Bavarian minister president Söder (2020) at the press conference preceding the second COVID-19 Lockdown in the German state, “Das Prinzip muss sein: Unsere Kinder müssen betreut werden. [...] Schule und Kita hat ja den Zweck auch, um die Wirtschaft laufen zu lassen.” (The Principle must be: Our children need to be looked after. [...] School and kindergarten also have the purpose to keep the economy running.” trans. by author). In such an utterance one can find a flavor of adultist governmentality which is bound with macro structures, including the schooling sector, that is not primarily designed to serve the educational interests of children and youth. Rather, it is designed so that children and youth may be placed somewhere while their adult caregivers can operate on the market without disturbance. It is in this sense that the young are taken out of community processes and as a result remain on the farthest end of civic participation, which seems to be pertinent to democratic participation. In its stead, pupils are taught about democratic engagement by adult educators according to a given curriculum to prepare them to be citizens in the future. As a corollary, denying them the scope of democratic engagement in the present. Gen Z protestors, especially those who take on regular school strikes not only challenge their democratic engagement being put on hold until tomorrow, but also navigate intellectual and socio-political life in ways that their adult educators never experienced. The question of how educational institutions like schools should address informal ways of democratic participation, thus opens. I suggest that the emergence of such a question is best answerable by recognizing the value of such courageous socio-political engagement in a way that what we currently understand as “school” itself must be re-imagined.

School strikes challenge the dominant primate of schools in providing democratic education, even when they do not confront schools directly. The indirect challenge, I suggest, comes from the fact that in order to exercise participation in society protestors choose to exit their designated “learning space” for socio-political reasons. School strikes thus challenge the notion that it is solely established institutions which should decide who receives what education as well as the belief that most “learning” takes place within these restricted spaces. In turn, protestors trigger adult reflection on what constitutes “appropriate” democratic participation for “minors.” Straume (2018) has argued that educational responsibility in a contemporary context implies showing pupils that they themselves can become responsible and politically active. My prior discussion of Gen Z activism, however, demands that educational theorists and practitioners re-cognize when pupils assume political responsibility and organization on their own. Gen Z activists are not only providing a refreshing



starting point for the childist reorganization of educational theory and praxis, but they are also simultaneously creating effective counterweights to formal and adult-shaped educational institutions. Hence, engaging with the intertwined question of civic education and democratic participation beckons embracing the “counter-weight” they offer adult-centric societies as a point of departure, as opposed to locating the scope for improvement within the institutional boundaries of schooling.

## CHILDIST EDUCATIONAL PRACTICES IN SCHOOLS

I do not hold that nothing can or should be done within schools themselves; for example, adult educators could re-present their knowledge of the past by emphasizing the historical importance of “law-breaking” activism in securing some of the rights that many adults e.g., “western” women, cherish today. In other words, how democracies have historically been transforming as a result of more and more sub-altern views capturing mainstream attention. Educators could use more empowerment-oriented approaches that make pupils aware of both—where their power lies in an unjust system, as well as how they are indeed (unknowingly) already using their power. Educators could also be candid about current possibilities for informal democratic participation by children and their (legal) consequences, rather than addressing these topics polemically or mobilizing adultist laws in order to self-justify “punishment” in diverse forms (e.g., Mattheis, 2020).

School administrators could support educators to find ways of engaging with school strikes by nurturing their educational value. The first thing is to “stop-and-think” (e.g., Kring, 2020)—taking up the invitation by protesters to address an emergency rather than simply playing along a status quo. Rather than calling for the integration of a further subject to already overloaded curricula in neoliberalized schools, a radical re-evaluation of material taught and a pragmatic focus on pressing social topics across disciplines are required. Topics addressed by school strikes for climate e.g., adultism of societies, climate crisis developments, global inequity and war, should be heard in schools.

School strikes also have implications for teacher education in so far as they reveal that children and youth do not necessarily need an adult to “show or tell” them how to become socio-politically responsible. As I have already suggested, they can inspire adults to become socio-politically responsible *too*. As an intergenerational relationship, education calls for reflexivity in teaching, not only “more learning” for pupils (Hoveid and Hoveid, 2019). An integral dimension of reflexivity in a childist educational practices of adults vis a vis children would then be a conscious commitment to *letting teach*. This reflexive dimension may also be understood as an invitation for adults to make room for children to contribute to their own ongoing socio-political formation for e.g., by broadening their capacities to see and hear what children show and say. When protesters practice courage to listen to their own political reason and deliberately disappear from their designated social space (school), to appear elsewhere (streets), they teach—courage. The adult counterparts, not restricted to formally appointed teachers, have the possibility

to use their own agency to *learn from* young protestors. Highlighting our shared (but differentiated) vulnerability, deep interdependence (also with the natural system we are a part of) figure prominently in a childist understanding of education. Vulnerability and deep interdependence in this paradigm are not restricted to children’s vulnerability and dependence on adults, rather interdependent vulnerabilities across the lifespan. Adultist responses (presented earlier) reveal that deep-rooted fear and anxieties of adults are integral to both: the downright hostility and well-meaning protectionism toward protestors. Nonetheless, the self-determination of protestors teaches that education can and should be viewed as flexible in terms of space, mode, and time. Thus, childism necessarily implies a pluralistic stance in the overlapping realms of education and democratic participation that is sensitively sensible.

## CONCLUSION: SENSITIVELY SENSIBLE DEMOCRATIC RESPONSES

The unprecedented case of Gen Z activism for intergenerational climate justice, as I have examined and reflected on in this article, beckons childist thinking in matters of socio-political education. Through their courageous socio-political engagement despite harsh adultist backlashes, Gen Z activists challenge mainstream tendencies of assuming that their “lack of experience” renders them into default addressees of pedagogy. In turn, opening up opportunities for adult educational theorists and practitioners to offer a legitimate space for the contribution that children and youth can make in broadening the scope of what is understood as socio-political growth of members of a given democratic community. To summarize my proposal: Gen Z activists could be viewed as socio-political educators in an overheated world. If my proposal is welcome, then it would imply pluralistic responses to the overlapping realms of education and democratic participation which are not *either sensitive or sensible*—rather, sensitively sensible.

By bringing together to etymologically connected, yet semantically polarized words: sensitively sensible, I evoke a theoretical focus that goes beyond addressing the “rational” adult-centered approaches that seek to include children in e.g., organization of curricular plans and teaching-learning pedagogies. The epistemological limitation of such an approach seems to be described by Haste (2004) as a “knowledge model of citizenship.” If the philosophical commitments underlying practice remain the same taking children’s views into organization of curricular plans will not suffice. The argument presented in this piece is that the axiom underlying teaching-learning relations i.e., adults teach, and children learn has to be expanded to include the possibility of learning from children. This is different from including children in e.g., curricular planning where the adult remains the epistemological superior of the child. The sensitivity that qualifies the sensible entails becoming aware of the layers of adultism that interfere with the overlapping realms of education and democracy as an intergenerational relationship. The childist proposition of “letting teach,” in turn, does not refer to seeing children as adult educators

who have voting rights. Rather, it is about getting past the adultist interferences (as far as possible) to grasp that despite structural and socio-political obstacles, impactful participation happens. A form of participation that cannot be captured within school walls but is literally only possible by going beyond it.

## DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The original contributions presented in the study are included in the article/supplementary material, further inquiries can be directed to the corresponding author.

## ETHICS STATEMENT

Written informed consent was not obtained from the individual(s), nor the minor(s)' legal guardian/next of kin, for the publication of any potentially identifiable images or data included in this article.

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The author confirms being the sole contributor of this work and has approved it for publication.

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