



Seen But Not Heard: The Inclusion of Children in Democratic Deliberation

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Abstract

The exclusion of children from democracy is rarely seen as a matter of concern. Childhood is considered a blissful period, not to be disturbed by the gruesome realm of adult politics. Drawing on critical theories of adultism, also known as childism (Liebel/Meade 2026, Wall 2025), this paper challenges the ideal of an apolitical childhood and problematises the lack of political rights of children. The argument for this is twofold: First, central democratic principles such as inclusion, equality, and self-determination demand the inclusion of all affected citizens; therefore, age-based exclusion is not justifiable. Secondly, this paper argues that children are a social group oppressed by adults (Young 1990). It challenges the notion that childhood is biologically determined, instead viewing it as socially constructed. Adultism, the belief system that legitimises the hierarchy of adults over children, is therefore not natural, but apt to change. Employing Young's (2000) argumentation, democratic inclusion through voting rights and consequential deliberation could remedy the oppression children face in today's society. The paper reflects on Young's conception of inclusive political communication, extending it with the concepts of Epistemic Justice (Fricker 2007) and Embodied Speech (Simplican 2009), thereby making it applicable to the needs and capabilities of children. Lastly, the paper explores the possibilities and challenges of children's deliberation by analyzing a study of German kindergartens that implemented democratic principles and practices.

Keywords: Democracy; Equality; Adultism; Childism; Oppression