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Black Pedagogy and the Limits of Control: Childhood, Agency and Resistance

Abstract

What happens when childhood is framed not as a space of possibility, but as a domain governed by adult authority? This article examines the concept of Black Pedagogy and its enduring logics of discipline, showing how they have historically constructed childhood as an object of control, obedience, and moral formation. Drawing on educational history, philosophy, childhood studies, literature, and contemporary media, it develops a twofold argument. First, it reconstructs the genealogy through which pedagogical and institutional forms of authority have constituted childhood as an object of governance. Second, it examines how literature, cinema, and children's everyday practices reveal that these logics of control are continuously negotiated and partially reconfigured from within. Rather than treating resistance as external opposition to power, the article conceptualises children's agency as emerging through play, imagination, cultural narratives, and everyday practices embedded in relations of authority. Accordingly, the article argues not that childhood exists beyond control, but that pedagogical control is never complete because it continuously generates possibilities for negotiation and reinterpretation.

Keywords: childhood; black pedagogy; cultural erasure; resistance; agency.

Introduction

What does it mean to conceive childhood not as an autonomous space of possibility, but as a domain shaped and regulated by adult-defined norms? Modern educational, legal, and cultural frameworks have long been grounded in the assumption that childhood is marked by vulnerability, dependency, and moral incompleteness. These assumptions have legitimized discourses and practices that limit children's voices, constrain their agency, and frame subjectivity primarily in terms of future development rather than present experience.

This article takes as its starting point the concept of *Schwarze Pädagogik* (Black Pedagogy), introduced by the sociologist Katharina Rutschky and later developed by the author and former psychoanalyst Alice Miller. The term designates a tradition of upbringing based on repression, emotional control, and the systematic production of obedience, in which coercive practices are justified as necessary for moral and social formation. While often associated with historical educational models, this article argues that its underlying logics persist in contemporary institutional and cultural settings in more subtle forms.

The central research question is how historical and cultural narratives of control have contributed to the marginalization of children's agency, and how such forms of domination are challenged through practices of resistance in symbolic and everyday contexts. Drawing on a genealogical and interdisciplinary approach, the paper examines how discourses of authority, innocence, and obedience have structured modern conceptions of childhood, while also tracing counter-narratives through which children reclaim voice, space, and autonomy across literature, media, and daily life. Instead of treating these dimensions as separate, the article explores how children's agency emerges within, rather than despite, relations of power.

The article advances a twofold thesis. First, it argues that dominant cultural narratives, from moralistic children's literature to institutional schooling, produce an epistemic and political marginalisation of childhood by naturalising adult authority. Second, it contends that fiction, contemporary media, and practices of play function as sites in which these logics are reworked from within, generating forms of agency that emerge immanently within relations of power rather than outside them. Taken together, these two strands demonstrate that pedagogical control is historically persistent yet structurally incomplete, since the very relations that seek to govern childhood simultaneously create possibilities for negotiation, reinterpretation, and everyday resistance. Resistance therefore emerges not as external opposition to authority, but as immanent to the very processes that seek to regulate childhood. From this perspective, the present work calls for moving beyond paternalistic models of care toward pedagogies grounded in recognition and relationality (Freeman, 2020).

In contemporary contexts, marked by digital mediation and performance-driven education, the tension between control and agency persists in reconfigured forms. This is particularly evident in digital surveillance and data-driven education, where children's behaviours are continuously monitored and translated into performance metrics. Artificial intelligence and platform governance, particularly through learning analytics systems, intensify these dynamics by organising learning through prediction, classification, and adaptive structuring. Educational decision-making becomes partially delegated to opaque computational logics, shifting surveillance toward anticipatory regimes based on profiling. Learning is therefore not only monitored but pre-structured through statistical expectations, where deviation risks being treated as noise rather than expression. These developments suggest not a departure

from earlier pedagogical logics, but their reconfiguration within computational environments, where control increasingly operates through anticipation rather than correction. In this context, the question of children's agency shifts: it concerns not only resistance to visible authority, but the ways in which subjects navigate, reinterpret, and at times displace systems that shape the conditions of their participation, thereby anticipating the forms of negotiation and displacement analysed in the subsequent sections of this paper.

The article develops this argument in three stages. It first reconstructs the historical genealogy of Black Pedagogy and the broader discursive formations through which childhood has been constituted as an object of governance, thereby developing the first strand of the article's argument. It subsequently analyses literary, cinematic, and popular cultural narratives that complicate these constructions by revealing alternative configurations of childhood agency, thus advancing the second strand at the level of cultural representation. The final section shifts from representation to practice, exploring how play, imagination, and selective disobedience operate as everyday forms of negotiation within adult-centred relations of authority, thereby completing the second strand through the analysis of lived experience. Together, these stages progressively develop the paper's central claim that the logics of pedagogical control are historically persistent but never complete, as children's agency emerges through everyday forms of resistance that are immanent to the very relations of power that seek to regulate it.

Theoretical Framework

The concept of childhood, far from being natural or universal, is historically and culturally constructed. A key framework for understanding how childhood has been shaped through adult authority is provided by Katharina Rutschky's notion of Black Pedagogy. Introduced in the late 1970s, the term designates a tradition of educational thought grounded in repression, emotional manipulation, and the systematic production of obedience. As Rutschky writes, her genealogical project aims to document «the consequences and collateral phenomena arising from the forms of attention to which children have been subjected since the eighteenth century» (Rutschky, 1977, p. 171), thereby revealing how pedagogical practices have contributed not only to the formation of childhood, but also to broader configurations of modern subjectivity. Within this framework, bourgeois educational practices relied on humiliation, the denial of empathy, and strict disciplinary control, all justified as necessary for moral development and social order. Black Pedagogy can thus be understood as a repertoire of techniques aimed at producing compliant and emotionally regulated subjects.

Alice Miller extends Rutschky's critique by linking these pedagogical logics to the psychic constitution of adults shaped by early experiences of coercion and emotional suppression. In *Am Anfang war Erziehung* (1980), she describes a »chain of obedience«, whereby children required to repress anger, fear, or grief internalize these affects and may later reproduce similar dynamics of domination in adult life (1980; 1989; 2004). This process is not merely behavioural, but deeply affective and relational, as it concerns the reorganisation of emotional life under conditions of authority. As Miller argues, «the child's dependence on parental love makes it impossible later in life to recognize these traumatizations, which remain hidden behind early idealization» (1980, p. 6). Education, in this sense, appears as

a key mechanism through which subjectivity is shaped, stabilised, and transmitted across generations.

The critique of Black Pedagogy intersects with broader genealogies of childhood. Philippe Ariès has shown how childhood, as a distinct and socially valued life stage, emerged in early modern Europe through transformations in family structures, literacy, and forms of social regulation (Ariès, 1960). This emergence is inseparable from new regimes of supervision and moral differentiation that increasingly distinguish children from adults while subjecting them to intensified forms of control. The modern child thus emerges as a dual figure: an object of protection and, simultaneously, of governance.

This ambivalence is further developed in Michel Foucault's analysis of disciplinary power. In *Discipline and Punish* (1975), institutions such as schools are described as paradigmatic sites for the production of docile bodies through surveillance, normalisation, and the regulation of time and space. These techniques do not operate solely through external coercion, but also through internalized self-regulation, shaping how subjects learn to observe, evaluate, and correct themselves. In this sense, modern discourses of protection do not eliminate control, but rather reorganise it within pedagogical and institutional frameworks that govern childhood in increasingly subtle ways.

Contemporary childhood studies have challenged earlier models that positioned children as passive recipients of socialization, instead emphasising their role as active participants in social and political life. Scholars such as Leena Alanen, Berry Mayall, Allison James, Alan Prout, and Jens Qvortrup argue that childhood should be understood as a generational and relational category rather than a natural stage of development (Alanen & Mayall, 2001; James & Prout, 1997; Qvortrup et al., 1994). At the same time, this emphasis on agency has been critically reconsidered. Erica Burman's deconstruction of developmental psychology shows how »the child« is often produced through normative frameworks that define what counts as proper development (Burman, 1994). Similarly, Karen Barad's notion of »intra-action« complicates any clear separation between subject and structure, suggesting that agency emerges within material-discursive configurations rather than as an individual attribute (Barad, 2007). Taken together, these perspectives show that childhood cannot be understood either as a natural developmental stage or as a passive object of socialisation. Rather, it emerges as a historically produced and relational field in which authority, subjectivity, and agency are continuously co-constituted.

Historical Construction of Childhood as Control

The cultural and institutional construction of childhood as a domain to be governed and disciplined by adults has deep roots in Western history. From early modernity onward, emerging forms of state authority, bourgeois family structures, and capitalist modes of production reshaped not only labour and domestic life but also the meaning of being a child (Cunningham, 1995, 2006; Heywood, 2001). This section traces a genealogy of these transformations, showing how educational, legal, religious, and scientific systems progressively configured childhood as an object of regulation and moral formation under the discursive guise of protection.

As Michel Foucault and Norbert Elias have shown, schools, orphanages, and reformatories developed alongside broader processes of rationalisation of bodies and behaviours required

by modern states and industrial capitalism, through distinct but complementary accounts of disciplinary and civilising processes. Schooling becomes a *dispositif* for the production of disciplined subjects defined by punctuality, obedience, and self-regulation. The silent classroom, the regimented desk, and the strict timetable exemplify what Foucault describes as the »microphysics of power«, through which bodies are made visible, comparable, and governable (1975). Foucault's notion of biopolitics (2004) further extends this analysis, showing how power invests life itself, positioning children as both individual and collective objects of governance (1976).

This rationalisation is reinforced by moral and cultural discourses that construct childhood as simultaneously innocent and deficient. Within Protestant-inflected frameworks, children are imagined as fragile subjects in need of continuous correction. As Foucault observes, disciplinary moralities persist beneath apparently modern forms of social regulation, revealing how historical regimes of normativity continue to structure contemporary subjectivities (1976). The bourgeois family, idealised as a space of intimacy, functions in this sense as a site of emotional discipline, where obedience is naturalised as love and deviation reframed as moral failure.

As Elias argues, these dynamics are embedded in broader processes of social regulation characteristic of modernity. The »civilising process« describes the gradual internalisation of external constraints, whereby affect, gesture, and bodily conduct become increasingly self-regulated according to socially imposed standards (Elias, 1939). Childhood occupies a central role in this process as a privileged site for the formation of self-control, where external discipline is transformed into durable dispositions. Such forms of governance extend beyond the domestic and European sphere through colonial regimes of knowledge and power. Within »civilising missions«, European constructions of childhood intersect with racialised hierarchies that position both colonised populations and children as subjects in need of moral and epistemic guidance (Said, 1994). Childhood thus becomes a symbolic register through which imperial authority is legitimised, reframing domination as education and intervention as care. This extension of pedagogical logics into colonial contexts further underscores the structural entanglement between education, governance, and power. The historical dynamics outlined above also become visible in nineteenth-century cultural and legal representations of childhood. In works such as *Oliver Twist* (1837-1839) and *David Copperfield* (1849-1850), Charles Dickens depicts children as exposed to both care and institutional suffering, revealing how sentimentalisation coexists with discipline and moral correction. Rather than isolated narratives, these representations can be read as expressing a broader pedagogical logic in which hardship is naturalised as part of development. Legal frameworks similarly consolidate this asymmetry. Modern civil and penal systems do not conceptualise children as fully autonomous rights-bearing subjects, but as dependents whose legal status is mediated through parental authority or state guardianship. The doctrine of *parens patriae* formalises this structure by authorising institutional intervention on the basis of presumed incapacity. Early child protection laws thus embed protection within forms of control rather than separating the two.

Reformist pedagogical thought, particularly that of Jean-Jacques Rousseau, attempts to reframe childhood as a distinct developmental stage. In *Émile ou De l'éducation* (1762), however, autonomy is staged within a tightly regulated environment, producing a persistent

ambivalence in liberal pedagogy: the recognition of childhood specificity coexists with its governance through controlled conditions of development structured along gendered lines (Tognon, 2022). Rather than replacing earlier forms of authority, liberal pedagogical thought reorganises them within developmental frameworks that continue to shape modern understandings of childhood. By the nineteenth century, this tension is further reshaped through the medicalisation and psychologisation of childhood. Developmental psychology and paediatrics establish normative frameworks for assessing »proper« growth, transforming variation into deviation and potential pathology. This logic resonates with contemporary forms of educational governance centred on risk management and the modulation of affective and cognitive thresholds in children's development (Lyså, 2021).

Contemporary diagnostic categories such as hyperactivity, oppositional behaviour, or emotional dysregulation do not mark a break with this trajectory, but rather extend it within clinical and therapeutic frameworks. The tension within liberal pedagogy reappears here in a new form: behavioural and developmental norms are articulated through psychological expertise, translating difference into measurable deviation and justifying increasingly fine-grained forms of observation and intervention. In this sense, the governance of childhood is not abandoned but reconfigured, as control operates through the language of care, normalisation, and well-being.

This continuity between pedagogical, medical, and institutional forms of authority came under renewed critical scrutiny in the aftermath of the Second World War. The catastrophic experience of Nazism and Fascism fundamentally reshaped debates on education and political responsibility, bringing questions of obedience, moral judgment, and the legitimacy of authority to the forefront of philosophical and educational reflection. In this context, Hannah Arendt argues that the uncritical reproduction of authority risks producing subjects unable to exercise independent judgment, thereby enabling broader conditions of systemic violence (Arendt, 1961). In Nordic and broader European contexts, the post-war critique of authoritarianism further exposed the dangers inherent in unreflective obedience, particularly by revealing how educational institutions could sustain wider cultures of conformity. The issue, then, is not authority as such, but the conditions under which it is exercised, legitimised, and reproduced. This tension continues to inform contemporary debates on childhood, democracy, and education, where questions of guidance, autonomy, and responsibility remain deeply intertwined.

Within this context, Black Pedagogy appears not as a historical anomaly but as a concentrated expression of coercive educational logics deeply embedded in Western traditions. Practices such as corporal punishment, emotional suppression, and enforced obedience are legitimised through discourses that construct children as irrational or developmentally deficient, thereby presenting coercion as a necessary condition of moral formation (Lalatta Costerbosa, 2019). Far from disappearing, these patterns continue to shape contemporary pedagogical cultures (Florio, Caso & Castelli, 2022; Lalatta Costerbosa, 2023). From this perspective, the governance of childhood emerges not merely as an educational concern but as a profoundly political one: it shapes how children encounter authority, internalise social hierarchies, and come to understand freedom itself as something deferred to adulthood.

At the same time, these forms of governance are never totalising. Because they operate through the production of subjectivities rather than external coercion alone, they inevitably

generate tensions, ambiguities, and points of friction. Children are formed within these relations in ways that also enable reinterpretation, negotiation, and selective refusal. What appears as compliance often contains subtle practices that expose the limits of disciplinary ordering. Literature and popular media do not merely depict childhood as governed or resistant; they foreground the ambivalence of this relationship, revealing the unstable boundary between regulation and agency. Within this space, resistance appears not as an external rupture but as a relational possibility that emerges from within the very dynamics of power. Childhood thus becomes a site of continuous symbolic contestation, where authority is neither simply reproduced nor entirely overcome.

Cultural Narratives and the Reconfiguration of Childhood

If educational systems, legal frameworks, and cultural narratives have historically constructed children as passive and malleable subjects, literature and popular media have also been read as counter-sites in which childhood is reimagined through rebellion and subversion. Children's literature, in particular, often oscillates between didactic socialisation and moments of narrative dissent. While frequently aligned with dominant pedagogical ideologies, it nonetheless opens spaces in which alternative forms of childhood subjectivity can emerge. As Jack Zipes argues, twentieth-century children's literature develops a »politics of enchantment«, in which imagination becomes a resource for resisting internalised obedience and reconfiguring social relations (Zipes, 1975).

The cultural texts discussed in this section are not presented merely as illustrations of childhood resistance. Instead, they constitute symbolic sites in which the article's second thesis becomes visible: namely, that children's agency does not emerge outside relations of power, but through their reinterpretation, negotiation, and partial transformation. Accordingly, these narratives reveal not the disappearance of power, but its constitutive incompleteness and the multiple ways in which it can be inhabited, negotiated, and reconfigured.

Roald Dahl's celebrated *Matilda* exemplifies this ambivalence. Here, children's agency takes a primarily intellectual and relational form, grounded in literacy, humour, imaginative intelligence, and telekinesis as symbolic devices that disrupt established asymmetries of authority. Authoritarian figures such as Miss Trunchbull embody institutionalised coercion, against which Matilda's actions reveal the constructed and contingent nature of adult authority. Childhood is thus reframed not as deficit but as cognitive and ethical agency. As the narrator notes, «whatever she needed to learn, she could learn it herself, through books» (Dahl, 1988, ch. 1). Her agency is also relational and collective, emerging through alliances that reshape vulnerability within oppressive environments. As discourse analysis suggests, the adult-child hierarchy in *Matilda* is not natural but socially produced and therefore reversible (Martens, 2015). Rather than escaping adult authority altogether, the protagonist demonstrates that authority itself becomes unstable when its legitimacy is questioned through knowledge, imagination, and collective solidarity.

Astrid Lindgren's *Pippi Långstrump* (1945) radicalises this reconfiguration of childhood autonomy. Pippi's portrayal of material, physical, and social independence destabilises normative assumptions about dependency, schooling, and socialisation. Her refusal of institutional discipline, combined with playful inversions of adult norms, constructs childhood as a space of inventive disorder rather than regulated development. Feminist readings have

emphasised how Pippi exceeds the figure of the misfit, instead functioning as a critique of gendered and pedagogical constructions of »proper« childhood. Her exaggerated strength and economic independence operate less as fantasy traits than as narrative strategies that expose the arbitrariness of adult authority and its normative expectations (Fraser, 1977).

A further and distinct configuration of childhood agency emerges in the cinema of Hayao Miyazaki. Rather than staging direct confrontation with adult authority, these films foreground forms of agency grounded in perception, affect, and relational attunement. Across his work, childhood is consistently positioned within worlds that are neither fully governable nor fully oppositional, but structured through shifting relations between human and non-human forces, institutions, and environments. In *My Neighbor Totoro* (1988), agency is articulated through sensory openness and ecological receptivity, where the child's experience unfolds in a space that resists clear separation between imagination and material world. *Spirited Away* (2001) reconfigures this dynamic within more explicitly institutional settings, where agency takes the form of navigation through opaque systems of labour and transformation, requiring forms of adaptation that do not coincide with internalisation. In *Princess Mononoke* (1997), childhood is instead embedded in a wider ecological and political field in which conflicting forms of life intersect, and forms of agency take shape through situated positioning within irreducible tensions between human and non-human agencies.

Across these narratives, what is at stake is not opposition to authority but a reconfiguration of action itself: resistance appears as negotiation, partial refusal, and forms of attentiveness that operate through relational rather than confrontational logics. Childhood agency is thus displaced from the register of conflict toward more diffuse modalities of engagement, where perception, adaptation, and co-presence become central epistemic and ethical dimensions. It is noteworthy that, unlike many Western narratives that frame resistance through confrontation with explicit authority figures, Miyazaki's films decentre antagonistic structures altogether. Rather than opposing children to adult power, they dissolve rigid hierarchies into fluid systems in which agency emerges through interdependence and coexistence.

These narrative configurations do not remain confined to literature or cinema, but extend into broader contemporary media ecologies in which childhood is increasingly embedded, reflecting ongoing transformations in childhood cultures (Ødegaard & Spord Borgen, 2021). Recent childhood studies have therefore moved beyond canonical cultural representations to account for how agency is reshaped within hybrid assemblages of media platforms, material practices, and digital infrastructures (Kraftl, 2020). Instead of being located exclusively in narratives of resistance or obedience, childhood today is shaped within conditions where expression, visibility, and participation are simultaneously enabled and structured by technological and institutional logics, increasingly intensified through processes of datafication and algorithmic governance.

Within such contexts, children's actions are translated into metrics of performance, risk, and potential, and are not merely observed but actively structured through predictive systems that shape the conditions under which agency becomes legible. This signals not a rupture with earlier disciplinary formations, but their reconfiguration within computational environments, where governance operates increasingly through anticipation rather than correction (Biswas et al., 2024). Childhood thus emerges as a site in which political, pedagogical, and epistemic categories are continuously negotiated within infrastructures that are at once material, symbolic, and partially opaque to the subjects they govern.

Contemporary popular culture further extends and rearticulates these dynamics across genres and affective registers. In *Little Miss Sunshine* (2006), for instance, resistance takes a more ironic and affective form. The family's journey toward a child beauty pageant exposes the violence of meritocratic and perfectionist ideals, transforming failure into a collective moment that can be read as refusal. Instead of celebrating success, the narrative questions normative expectations surrounding achievement, competitiveness, and social recognition. Olive's final performance becomes significant precisely because it refuses to conform to the evaluative criteria that structure the pageant itself. Rather than pursuing recognition through excellence or disciplined self-presentation, she transforms participation into an act of collective affirmation that unsettles dominant ideals of childhood achievement. Resistance thus emerges not through direct confrontation with institutional authority, but through the ironic displacement of the norms governing performance, success, and respectability. In this way, the film shows that children's agency is constituted not outside evaluative frameworks but through their reinterpretation, negotiation, and partial subversion.

Across these narratives, resistance rarely appears as spectacular confrontation or definitive rupture. It is articulated through minor practices – play, humour, secrecy, rule-bending, and imaginative reinterpretation – that unsettle adult regimes of authority from within. Drawing on Deleuze and Guattari's notion of »minor politics«, these micro-practices do not overturn structures of power but expose their internal tensions, limits, and points of instability (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987). Their significance lies in reaffirming children not as passive recipients of socialisation but as situated subjects endowed with desires, imaginaries, and capacities for world-making.

Importantly, these narratives do not merely depict resistance; they can also invite adult readers and spectators to reconsider pedagogical relations themselves, opening up the possibility of forms of listening, co-presence, and shared construction that are not separable from play, excess, and affective intensity. As Dahl writes, «never do anything by halves if you want to get away with it. Be outrageous. Go the whole hog» (Dahl, 1988, ch. 12).

Everyday Acts of Resistance: Play, Imagination, and Disobedience

Building on the cultural narratives discussed above, this section completes the article's second line of argument by shifting attention from symbolic representations to the ordinary practices through which children's agency is enacted in everyday life. If literature and popular culture reveal how relations of authority can be reimagined, children's everyday experiences show how they are continuously negotiated in practice. Play, imagination, selective disobedience, and forms of symbolic reappropriation are therefore understood not as exceptional forms of opposition, but as ordinary practices through which children reinterpret, inhabit, and occasionally transform adult-centred environments.

As Huizinga (1950) and Sutton-Smith (1997) have shown, play operates in tension with normative regimes of rationality and productivity. It constitutes a mode of world-recomposition in which relations between objects, roles, and meanings become reversible. Within play, material and symbolic elements are detached from their prescribed functions: objects are re-signified, spatial and temporal coordinates are reorganised, and rules are temporarily suspended or rewritten. Imagination, in this sense, is also a form of structural experimentation with the boundaries of the social order.

In institutional contexts such as schools, resistance often takes ordinary and less visible forms: distraction, silence, refusal to participate, parallel conversations, or the invention of alternative games within regulated time. Following de Certeau (1984), these practices can be understood as »tactics« through which subordinate subjects navigate and rework imposed »strategies« of control. These everyday acts of resistance take the form of micro-gestures – whispered exchanges, invented codes, playful subversions of rules – that do not constitute direct opposition but situated appropriations of institutional space.

The political relevance of these practices becomes clearer when placed in dialogue with pedagogical and developmental perspectives that have sought to reconfigure the adult-child relation. The Reggio Emilia approach, developed by Loris Malaguzzi, conceptualises children as active protagonists of meaning-making through the idea of the »hundred languages of children« (Malaguzzi, 1996). Expression is not reducible to verbal or cognitive performance but distributed across embodied, aesthetic, and relational modalities. Contemporary childhood studies further develop this shift by emphasising children as social and political actors whose practices can unsettle normative assumptions about learning, care, and authority (Biswas et al., 2024; Millei & Kallio, 2018). At the same time, empirical research in educational contexts continues to show how adult-centred logics persist in institutional practices, often limiting spontaneity, expression, and dissent (Florio, Caso & Castelli, 2020; 2022). In increasingly datafied and standardised environments, these tensions are further intensified as children's behaviours become subject to continuous monitoring and evaluation.

These perspectives reinforce the argument that children's agency is not external to institutional settings but enacted through their ongoing negotiation of institutional norms and expectations.

Within this field, Gianni Rodari's *Grammar of Fantasy* (1973) advances a complementary pedagogical insight: children's imaginative deviations are not obstacles to learning but constitutive of it. Similarly, the capabilities approach (Dixon & Nussbaum, 2012) reframes childhood beyond protection alone, emphasising the cultivation of expressive and relational capacities and the conditions for human flourishing. These perspectives converge in challenging models of childhood grounded in passivity, repositioning children as co-producers of meaning within educational and social contexts.

Simultaneously, everyday resistance complicates the tendency to interpret children's actions through pathological frameworks. As Burman (1994) has shown, the psychologisation of childhood often redefines refusal, disruption, or non-compliance as individual deficit, thereby obscuring the structural and relational conditions in which such behaviours emerge. In this framework, resistance is translated into dysfunction, while institutional expectations are naturalised as developmental norms. The political significance of children's actions is thereby reduced to individual pathology.

A complementary perspective is offered by Donald Winnicott, whose work allows these dynamics to be reframed at the level of psychic and relational experience. His concepts of the »true self« (1965) and of »transitional phenomena« (1958; 1971) foreground the role of play, spontaneity, and symbolic continuity as conditions for the integration of subjectivity. In this view, play is not merely expressive but constitutive, providing a space in which the child negotiates the boundary between inner experience and external reality without being fully subsumed by either. Central to this perspective is the notion of the »good-enough

environment« (1965), understood not as the absence of constraint, but as a relational setting that sustains exploration without rigidly predetermining its outcomes. Such an environment does not eliminate asymmetry, but prevents it from becoming intrusive or totalising, allowing external demands to be gradually appropriated and reworked rather than passively internalised.

From this standpoint, gestures such as withdrawal, refusal, or imaginative deviation can be understood not as failures of adaptation, but as attempts to preserve continuity of experience and subjective coherence. Resistance thus appears less as opposition to authority than as a situated mode of negotiating it. From a pedagogical perspective, this implies that educational environments should not aim to eliminate asymmetry or uncertainty, but to sustain conditions in which children can engage with external demands without being fully subsumed by them. Teaching, in this sense, involves an unavoidable exercise of power, yet one that remains open to being reinterpreted, negotiated, or even refused by the child.

Playful inversions, selective non-participation, and imaginative detours do not simply oppose authority but reveal its limits. They expose the fragility of adult-centred regimes of control and show that agency is always exercised within relations of constraint. These practices also invite a rethinking of the adult role as a relational stance oriented toward responsiveness and co-presence (Mullin, 2014). Childhood is thus understood not as a pre-political stage but as a field in which power, imagination, and subjectivity are continuously negotiated. In this sense, the literary and cultural narratives analysed in the previous section do not merely represent these practices; they help illuminate the forms through which children negotiate authority in everyday life. They point toward forms of attention, experimentation, and co-presence that educational practices might cultivate, not by replicating them directly, but by recognising their epistemic value.

Rather than romanticising the child as a figure of pure resistance, these practices point to a more complex configuration in which agency is situational, partial, and relationally produced. Childhood, in this sense, is not defined by opposition to power but by the multiple ways in which power is inhabited, reworked, and occasionally displaced in everyday life.

Conclusion

The historical genealogy reconstructed in this article has shown that the construction of childhood as an object of discipline, moral formation, and adult authority is not an incidental feature of modernity, but a constitutive element of its educational, political, and institutional imaginaries. Black Pedagogy crystallises these logics by revealing how practices of care, protection, and education have often operated through mechanisms of obedience, emotional regulation, and normative control. Yet the analysis has also shown that these processes never fully determine childhood. Across cultural narratives and everyday practices, children do not simply receive adult authority but engage with it through interpretation, negotiation, and creative reworking. Rather than romanticising the child as an inherently resistant subject, this article has argued that resistance is immanent to the very relations through which childhood is governed and formed.

This perspective calls for a rethinking of pedagogy, politics, and ethics beyond the opposition between authority and autonomy. As Gert Biesta argues, education inevitably involves forms of intervention whose meaning cannot be fully predetermined; the pedagogical challenge is

therefore not to eliminate asymmetry, but to inhabit it responsibly, allowing children to take up, reinterpret, or transform what is offered (Biesta, 2020). Likewise, taking seriously what Loris Malaguzzi called the »hundred languages of children« means recognising children's plural forms of expression as constitutive of educational practice instead of subordinate to adult-defined standards of productivity or compliance. Pedagogical and legal institutions should therefore create conditions in which participation accompanies protection and children's interpretations actively contribute to shaping educational processes.

These questions acquire renewed significance in contemporary educational landscapes increasingly shaped by datafication and algorithmic governance. As predictive technologies become embedded in schools, children's actions are translated into measurable indicators of performance, engagement, and risk, while educational trajectories are progressively organised through anticipatory forms of evaluation. Such developments do not replace earlier pedagogical logics; they transform them within computational environments where authority increasingly operates through prediction, optimisation, and continuous comparison.

The analysis developed here suggests that childhood should not be understood as existing beyond relations of authority, but as a relational field of political contestation in which authority itself remains constitutively incomplete. What ultimately connects Black Pedagogy, cultural narratives, children's everyday practices, and contemporary forms of algorithmic governance is not simply the persistence of pedagogical control, but the impossibility of fully governing the meanings that children produce from within these relations. It is precisely this constitutive incompleteness that makes childhood a privileged site for understanding how power, agency, and subject formation remain continuously open to reinterpretation, negotiation, and transformation.

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Biography

Carolina Tognon is a researcher in philosophy of law at the University of Bologna, where she received her PhD in Philosophy, Science, Cognition, and Semiotics (PSCS) and is also a teaching tutor in bioethics. Her research focuses on childhood, children's rights, educational violence, and the moral and political dimensions of adult authority. Drawing on the critical tradition of Black Pedagogy, she examines how practices of education, care, and protection shape children's agency within asymmetrical relations of power. Her broader interests include bioethics, vulnerability, relational autonomy, and the normative limits of authority over children.