

Janusz Korczak Society in Kursk: Teacher Education Students in Russia

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This paper discusses the Janusz Korczak Society in Kursk, Russia, and its connection to the training of teachers and other professionals. Students at Kursk State University learn about the life and death of Janusz Korczak and dedicate their time to serve children in local hospitals, kindergartens, children's orphanages, etc. This paper will discuss their experiences and the impact on their views of teaching.

Changes within our schools

Recently, while looking through educational newspapers, I found an article, which astonished me greatly. It was about a teenager whose father was a communist and wanted his son to study the books written by Marx and Lenin. The son agreed... but only if he was paid. So now, the father, who runs his own business and has become wealthy because of it, is paying his son money for each book. I can only laugh and “marvel” at how even the learning of “genuine communism” has been transformed by the realities of today's market economy!

New way of living versus old ideology—free will versus necessity—these and other moral paradoxes are very symbolic of our society today. Russia is in a period of rapid change. There are too many political and economic ambiguities; too many contradictions, contraries and problems for any human being, or for any organization or institution to understand and deal with.

These social, cultural, religious, and political phenomena have had an impact on the educational system in Russia, its teachers' education and, in turn, on the aims and objectives for the moral education of Russia's students. As the great Russian psychologist Leo Vygotsky once wrote, “what is really meaningful in moral education is the social situation” [¹].

¹ Vygotsky, L.S. Educational Psychology. M.: Pedagogika, 1991. – P. 252.

The lives of great men are like legends -- difficult but beautiful

It's clear that the life of children and teenagers occurs in close proximity with the life of their parents and teachers. The same is true of the values and moral orientations of children, which are formed as part of a "dialogue" with the values and morality of the many adults around them. In this respect it becomes very important to prepare and train new generations of teachers who have not only genuine moral values but also who are capable of serving as moral models for their students. Such a teacher was **Janusz Korczak** for the children at his orphanage.

"The lives of great men are like legends -- difficult but beautiful," – that's what he said, and that's how he lived. "It was Janusz Korczak who introduced progressive orphanages designed as just communities into Poland, founded the first national children's newspaper, trained teachers in what we now call moral education, and worked in juvenile courts defending children's rights" [²].

- Having great insight into the souls of children, he created a book with the incredible title, "How to Love a Child."—When stressing different words in the title we learn from Korczak, either the ways of love, or the nature of love, or what it means to treat a child with love. All three aspects are extremely important for any parent and any educator. Korczak then raises questions about the rights of children—their right to sadness and tears; to possess private life and to keep secrets; their right to earn a living and be independent. [³]

As a Dutch educator and active Korczak researcher, Joop Berding reflects:

"When I came to know Korczak through his many books, I was confronted with a completely new way of looking at education, educators and children. He upset me because he mainly posed questions about what I did as an educational counselor but gave no theoretical or definitive answers. He said that if you want to be an educator, you have to realize that "all tears are salty". By this he meant that not only adults, but children also have their deepest sorrows, and occurrences which depress them. Korczak asked educators to step down from their privileged position with their power to shape children according to their ideals. Children have a right to be who they are, Korczak said, and he practiced this pedagogy of difference everyday [⁴"].

[...] Every year, when presenting my first lectures to incoming freshmen, I usually start with the story of the life and death of J. Korczak. And as usual the students are greatly impressed. At the end of this short course entitled "Introduction to Educational Activities" (only 5 lectures and 4 seminars), I ask them to anonymously answer a few questions—one of which is, *what has changed in you and your attitudes towards children and education after reading and studying Korczak's books?*

Most of the students agree that he was a great personality. But unfortunately, common knowledge of Korczak in Russia is similar to what Betty Lifton, the author of the best English book about Korczak, describes:

² Lifton, B.J. *The King of Children*. – Schocken Books Inc., 1988. – P.3.

³ *Ibid.* Pp. 355-356.

⁴ Berding, J. *A Man For Our Times/Young Minds Magazine*. – No 77. July/August 2005. – P. 19.

“Most Americans have never heard of Korczak, a Polish-Jewish children’s writer and educator who is as well known in Europe as Anne Frank. Like her, he died in the Holocaust and left behind a diary; unlike her, he had a chance to escape that fate – a chance he chose not to take” [5].

Her words could be easily applied to many Russians—as very few know about Korczak. He is still not part of any official curriculum plan at teacher’s colleges. But after learning about him, my students tend to say that every teacher and every future parent MUST read Korczak because it is the ABC of education, and some of his words should become a motto for today’s teachers. Many students also add that they have strongly recommended that their friends and parents also read Korczak’s books.

Below are some other typical answers from my students:

- Korczak has totally changed my understanding of children.
- His books made me become more patient with children and... my parents.
- I have become more kind with the people around me.
- I learned that for the sake of one’s own favorite activities, a human being is ready to sacrifice everything, including his life.
- My opinion of schoolteachers has dramatically changed. I started thinking of them as people who deserve the same respect, trust and patience as children.
- My attitude to my future occupation is different now. I understood how important it is to be a teacher.
- Korczak’s works filled me with pride. Because at least one adult managed to understand children’s rights and write about them.

The answers above are from two months ago but they are very similar to other written replies from my former students over the past fifteen years.

Why and how I started

I have been working in the field of teacher training for over twenty years, and during this time I couldn’t help but notice problems that are constantly repeated. One of these problems is that students and graduates who received very high grades in subjects connected with pedagogy and often in all subjects which they study at the university level do not always become good teachers and do not want to remain teachers throughout their lifetime. On the contrary, those who are often only satisfactory in their learning quite often turn into brilliant schoolteachers. Just empirically through practice, and without special studies, I came to an understanding (and this is a common fact, of course), that together with good knowledge of the subject matter and educational ideas, one needs to acquire a *calling* for teaching, or a *vocation*, a deep emotional involvement with children, and a desire and readiness to work with them both during and after their formal classes.

⁵ Lifton, B.J. The King of Children. – P. 3.

Before going further into this subject I need to explain what I mean by “vocation” or “calling.” I have found a challenging approach developed by David Hansen, who considers it possible to *search for one’s vocation* and to finally *discover* it. For Hansen, “*a vocation is more like an accomplishment than a gift. It requires knowledge, not just of self but of the world and its social practices, and it requires effort, that is, practice. One can grow into a sense of calling that one does not already have*” [6].

In other words, teachers-in-training need to have a social arena where they are strongly tempted (by the situation or the people around them) to behave as if they have a calling for teaching and educating others. And here pro-social activities are absolutely required.

Another point. Definitely there are people who could be called “born teachers” but they constitute from 1 to 2% of all the teachers in schools. So what to do about the others? I have asked this question since the first days of my university career. Professor Daniel Coleman points out that “we have two minds, one that thinks and one that feels”. In the words of Jane Bluestein who analyses Coleman’s work, “these are two different ways of knowing, one more rational and analytical, the other more impulsive and emotional, even illogical at times. Nonetheless, the parts of the brain that comprise these “two minds”, actually work together, along with the body, mind and emotions, in a linked system” [7].

I tend to believe that if we don’t incorporate these *two “minds”* in the process of teaching future teachers then we will never have positive results.

This is the second conclusion or an idea of the necessity to involve students into highly pro-social and very emotional activities, keeping in mind that such practice will help them to develop their vocation.

These two ideas, and also the widening of a teachers’ knowledge and improving their professional skills, constitute the basis of my activities.

Here is another example from my own experience... eight years ago, at the hematological department of the Regional Children’s Hospital I noticed a cute little girl, a newcomer, who just turned 5, with huge hazel eyes and long curly hair. Anya was so adorable that no one could pass by her without smiling and giving her a hug. The girl was diagnosed with blood cancer. She stayed in the hospital from March until December, and from the hospital she performed her last walk... into eternity. From the beauty we met at the beginning, she declined into a tiny skinny girl, lame and weary. But her will for life and her inner strength were so incredible that even two weeks before her physical death, at a holiday party we held for all the hospital kids, she volunteered to sing. Bald-headed, and with a protective mask on her mouth, she was singing a children’s song and our music instructor (who I invited for the occasion) accompanied her on the guitar. This scene is still in my eyes, I can never forget it, and I know that all the students who were there at that time will never forget either.

[...] The charitable work that we began in the hospital fifteen years ago is still quite intense with new generations of future teachers replacing those who were pioneers in the field. We started as a group of students and myself at the School of Foreign Languages of the Teacher’s Training Institute (now the State University.) At that time there were several impulses for me to begin:

⁶ Hansen, David T. (1995). *The Call to Teach*. New York: Teachers College Press. Quoted from: Wike, Victoria S. *Teaching Future Teachers about Vocation: Lessons from Mr. Hatch and Miss Rumphius/Featured Journal Articles*. – Volume 2. – 2006. www.collegevalues.org

⁷ Quoted from: Bluestein, J. P. *Creating Emotionally Safe Schools. A Guide for Educators and Parents*. Health Communications, Inc., Florida. - P. 18

- I learned about the Korczak movement and participated in the first international Korczak conference which was held in Russia in 1991, and since that time Kursk Korczak group has never been alone. Tremendous help has always been provided by the Swiss Korczak supporters (for music and fruit for the hospital), Dutch and French friends, to name just a few.
- My mother was a very devoted pediatrician and I personally knew many doctors who usually told their professional stories at our kitchen table, I remembered them from my childhood. So the idea of helping needy children ran in my family.
- I saw the initiative and energy on the part of my students who were not satisfied with having only theoretical classes—they truly needed a social arena to develop themselves and their vocation.

Taken together, these reasons brought me to the biggest children's hospital and from there—to the most dramatic department—for those children with blood cancer and other heavy blood diseases some of whom were even then destined to die.

[...] I remember some of my first student-volunteers who, from time-to-time, would present papers at different international students' conferences. Once, in the Netherlands, Dasha, one of the most active, narrated the following story, “we so much liked that boy, and we often played with him. One day after a week of vacation we came to the hospital and asked about Aljoshka, but the doctor said, he died early that week, he died without us...” She said it plainly, without tears, but the whole audience was weeping, just listening to her.

Recently I met Dasha in the local shopping mall (she has been working as a school teacher for almost ten years.) She is still a slim and attractive young woman, and while we were standing and talking, a few little boys and girls (who happened to be her school students), noticed her and rushed to her from the other end of the mall. They were beaming at her, and she seemed to be delighted to see them too. So, there are definitely some positive results.

Due to the time limit, I will only briefly touch on some of the other types of activities typical for our Korczak Society:

- As one example, we collected over 300 books and donated them to the regional children's library.
- We met a blind poet who was sixteen at the time and whose verses were not widely known in Kursk. So we typed his poems on the computer and then published his book with a circulation of about 500 copies. Then we succeeded to sell the book to different people and organizations, and gave all the money to that young man.
- As a third example, last year we found out that the local orphanage for children has a very old and shabby playground, so we managed to order or build new items for the playground—then we installed them and painted every piece on the playground.

But the one constant and consistent concern belongs to the hematological department of the local children's hospital. It is difficult to count how many parties and festivals we have managed to arrange for those kids, how many presents we brought them during the last sixteen years, how many songs, games and dances they have learned since that time, how much laughter and how many smiles the students brought them.

The reasons are below, formulated by one of my most active students, Anna Savranskaya:

“Preparing to become teachers, we do understand the value of happy upbringing and genuine character education, which is one of the most important problems all over the world. We can’t be indifferent when children suffer. It is not a secret there are a lot of problems connected with health care, abandoned children, high cost of education, bad equipment of educational institutions and providing healthy entertainment.

There is no time left to wait that somebody will come and solve all our problems. No matter, who is to blame, but we at least can try to do something to improve the situation... But the main thing is bringing Love and Care into their (children’s) lives. If you could only imagine what a pleasure it is to see little boys and girls laughing. Their happy faces are the best rewards for us [8].

It looks like Anna expressed it the best way. By the way, when she was in her first year and volunteered to participate in the children’s hospital activities, I was delighted to find afterwards a newspaper, prepared by Anna and her classmates, entitled “May the sun be always with you”.

To conclude, I should repeat again that those pro-social charitable activities not only change the lives of the kids for whom they are done but also the students themselves. But the longer I work, the more I understand that emotions, although strong and positive, will not produce a serious impact on others if they are not supported by the work of one’s own mind. To do this, I try to bring them new facts and additional information.

This year I came across an amazing document, a “Children’s Bill of Rights”, composed in 1996 by a group of 650 children from 7 countries and 3 continents [9]. I asked my students to compare this document with the rights which Korczak created a century ago. And again I got very interesting responses.

My colleagues keep asking me, why I insist on involving students with sick children or children with special needs, or who are at-risk, etc. These colleagues consider that because we are training future teachers who will work at regular schools, and because they will hardly ever meet with sick students or children, we need only to involve them into practice with healthy children—I totally disagree.

I believe that such experiences give my students an incredible amount of positive emotions; it trains their capacity to sympathize, it provides them with insight into child psychology, it teaches kindness and it shows how extremely rewarding this work could be. Besides, it’s critical for sick and needy kids to know that other people are interested in them; that other people like them for what they are, and that other people are ready to spend their time and talents with them. It’s like ripples on the water: they become wider and deeper, involving more and more people inside. I trust that in this way too we can make the world better.

At our very last seminar my third-year students performed several scenes from the play “Korczak’s Children” by Jeffrey Hatcher. They staged the scene of Korczak’s children marching in the streets of Warsaw—their final procession to their final destination. I couldn’t keep my tears inside as they were playing with such emotions and heart to only one spectator – myself. I dare believe, they will keep their memories and their experience through their lives and share them with their future students. And when after many years their time comes to pass away, they will be able to feel and write as wisely as Korczak did:

⁸ Savranskaya, A. We Are Here to Make You Happier!!! // Janusz Korczak International Newsletter. – No 14. – Amsterdam. – October 13, 2005.

⁹ The Children’s Bill of Rights. – The Children’s Bill of Rights secretariat. – Bethesda, MD, 1996.

*“Man feels and ponders death as though it were the end,
when in fact death is merely the continuation of life.
It is another life.*

*You may not believe in the existence of the soul, yet you
must acknowledge that your body will live on as green grass,
as a cloud. For you are, after all, water and dust [¹⁰].”*

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¹⁰ Korczak, J. Ghetto Diary.