

# JANUSZ KORCZAK - AN INTRODUCTION

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In recent years there has been a growing interest in the educational ideas of the Polish-Jewish educator, physician and writer Janusz Korczak (1878–1942). Korczak is best known for giving his own life when he insisted on boarding a train to be with the Jewish children sent from the Warsaw ghetto to an extermination camp. Less known is the way Korczak learned as a young educator "How to love a child", and how to live and work with large groups of underprivileged children. Korczak became a leading advocate of children's rights and initiated educational practices of great contemporary relevance.

Janusz Korczak was born as Henryk Goldszmit in 1878 in a rather well-to-do, assimilated Jewish family in Warsaw, Poland. His father was a prominent lawyer who died in 1876 under mysterious circumstances after a period of mental illness. The little Henryk was mainly brought up by his mother and other women, in the rather depressing atmosphere of the drawing-room. At a young age he learned that children are not always respected by adults or given the physical and psychological space to flourish. He initially studied medicine, and it was during his medical training that he entered a writing competition under the pseudonym "Janusz Korczak" – the name by which he is best known (Lifton, 1988).

Even then Janusz Korczak was fascinated by children, especially street children. They – largely underprivileged orphans of both Jewish and non-Jewish origin – became his calling. He wrote about them in novels and, after practising medicine for a short time, devoted himself to their education. For them he demanded in 1919 in his now famous magnum opus, *How to Love a Child* (Korczak, 1976), a Magna Charta or constitution for the rights of children. Among these are the right of the child to be who she is and to live in the present. It is no understatement that on these rights alone a comprehensive philosophy of education might be founded.

This, however, didn't happen, for though Korczak's legacy consists of thousands of written pages (novels for both adults and children, stories, essays, plays, poems and much more), he was by no means a philosopher of education in the current academic sense (Berding, 1994). He was a reflective practitioner (Schön, 1990); for him reflection on what it means to be an educator was central. His open-mindedness towards children and his great trust and confidence in their abilities made it possible for him to experiment. He invented ways to have children participate in the communities of which they are members (Dror, 1998).

In this respect he was far ahead of his time and one of the founding fathers of children's participation and of education for citizenship (UNICEF, 2003).

Korczak's shift from medicine to education took its most pronounced turn in 1907 when he volunteered to serve as an educator in a summer camp for Warsaw's working-class children. Prior to that he had no experience of group education. His experiences were restricted to helping individual children who were doing their homework. In his naïveté Korczak was hardly prepared for what it meant to be in charge of a group of around thirty children. He wanted the experience and the subsequent holiday to be a pleasant occasion – for himself! He brought some fireworks, a gramophone and some toys, and did not make any special arrangements, trusting that everything would run smoothly. He wrote, *"In the naïve belief that it was all very easy, I was captivated by the charm of the assignment ahead of me"* (p. 333).

He hadn't imagined that it took authority, structure and especially anticipation to have a group of children and educators live together in an acceptable fashion. The trip to the country outside Warsaw, by train, horse and cart and finally on foot, turned into chaos. Children jumped out of the train, fought and cried, and overwhelmed Korczak with their worries, homesickness, questions and problems. Then, arriving at the camp, it seemed that Korczak still hadn't learned, for when the children were asked to change into their summer clothes, chaos erupted. Then things got worse. *"How should the children be seated at the table? I had not anticipated this problem either. I decided hastily at the last moment, in conformity with the paramount principle of freedom, to let them sit as they liked"*, Korczak reflected (p. 339). But the effect of this principle was that children constantly changed seats, making it nearly impossible for him to keep track of who was who. When Korczak allowed the children to pick their own beds, further chaos ensued. The children got into several fights.

Contemplating what happened that day, Korczak came to the conclusion that in spite of his knowledge of child psychology, he was at a loss. He didn't have the faintest idea how to get through the month that lay ahead. During the following night the children fought again, and Korczak's feelings were hurt: *"So that was their response to my kindness, zeal, effort. The crystal edifice of my dreams had come toppling down"* (p. 345).

Gradually Korczak began to understand what was going wrong. He reflected on his own need for a happy holiday and began to see how his own lack of seriousness had influenced the process within the group. Some days later, there was a real crisis: at night some boys gathered sticks to have a fight. Now Korczak abandoned his sentimental attitude, took the sticks away and announced that they would talk the next day. This was a decisive moment in the relationship between the educator and the children, for as it turned out the next day, during a get-together in the forest, for the first time I spoke not to the children but with the children. I spoke not of what I would like them to be, but of what they would like to be and could be. Perhaps then, for the first time, I found out that one could

learn a great deal from children; that they make, and have every right to make, demands, conditions, reservations" (p. 345).

The following year, at the new summer camp, he tried even more different approaches. First of all, he learned all the children's names by heart, so that he could address them personally. Secondly, he made notes about everything that was interesting in the children. These observations became his "material", much as a librarian rummages through a newly arrived pile of books (p. 355). Furthermore, he didn't give the children unlimited freedom but took the lead in the organisation of the group. For instance he collected the postcards that the children wanted to send home, and he took care of the money. He also asked older children to help him. When a younger child cried, he sent an older boy to console him. "He would do it better than I," Korczak said. And if not, "A few tears do no harm" (p. 356).

Everything now depended on organisation, foresight, observation and the involvement of the group as a whole. In the evening Korczak told stories about last year's events, and he told the children what to do in case they woke up in the night. Calm spread over the group. Korczak even found time to make some more notes. In the following days the group organised itself more and more, but Korczak was well aware of the social processes that were going on. A boy of twelve had a negative influence on the group. Instead of lecturing, Korczak spoke with him on the conditions of his stay in the summer camp, in a talk between equals. Because this boy had already begun a career in criminality, there was no reason to be "soft" on him. They came to an agreement, and at the end shook hands (p. 361). This same sense of real life was evident in Korczak's treatment of children's fights. He did not forbid them to fight (which would have been unrealistic) but kept track of the numbers of fights. He even made a chart and showed it to the children: "July 5th: thirty children, twelve fights; a meeting to stop fighting; next day, three fights only; again eight and ten; then six fights... After a fortnight, one fight only" (p. 369).

Korczak organised meetings on several subjects like swimming in the river and a mess in the toilet, and he concluded, "The children's assistance is absolutely essential to the teacher, the prerequisite being, however, constant, vigilant control and a duty roster" (p. 372). Furthermore, there were no privileges attached to doing a task; it was a matter of honour. And by spreading all the necessary tasks across the entire group, the educator had time to devote to children who had special needs (Berding, 1995).

What was learned from these experiences? First, Korczak discovered that to speak of "education" in any acceptable fashion meant that the children themselves had to be involved. "Not over their heads," one might say of this participatory view of education. Indeed, these experiences and the way Korczak reflected upon them made him one of the founding fathers of the movement for youth participation in educational institutions. In Korczak's view the educational relationship is one of partnership, not of power (Eisler, 2000).

Secondly, Korczak learned that becoming an educator involved respect and dialogue. Indeed, respect became a central notion in his philosophy. We must accept who children are and who they want to become – yes, but not at any cost (Korczak, 1992). There are limits to self-actualisation, to use a popular term from the 1970s. Dialogue was, for Korczak, the ultimate means of education and of learning. As he put it: speaking with children, instead of to them.

Finally – and this is something I wish to emphasise in this article – Korczak displayed an uncommon attitude of self-reflection, and in an uncompromising way. Today we accept that self-reflection is at the heart of our undertakings as educators, and in the "education of educators" there is ample space for learning this art. In this respect, Korczak was way ahead of his time (Joseph, 1999).

In 1912, following his work in the summer camps, Korczak accepted the post of director of the Jewish orphanage, Dom Sierot (Home of the Orphans). Korczak and his few co-workers lived and worked in the orphanage with between 100 and 200 children and youngsters, mostly orphans, but also children from one-parent families. Their sociocultural background was mixed, but most of them were from the lower middle classes.

Korczak was determined to create a completely new educative environment for the children – or rather one should say, with the children, for later, looking back, he wrote: "The child became the patron, the worker and the head of the home" (Korczak, 1967: 385). Within the orphanage Korczak organised new institutions, or "educational arrangements" such as a children's parliament, an experimental school (Korczak, 1982) and a children's newspaper, *The Little Review*, the first newspaper in the world whose editorial board consisted entirely of children, and instituted many other new means of communication, such as a bulletin board, educators' and children's logbooks, a mailbox, the lost and found cabinet and so on. (All this is described in detail in Korczak, 1997: see also Lifton, 1988.)

But the most important institution was the children's court, set up to guard and maintain the idea of justice that Korczak had in mind and was founded upon his Constitution of the Rights of the Child. Korczak had developed his Constitution into a book of laws that consisted of many sections intended to regulate the little community. However, unlike many other systems of law, the main sentence was not punishment, but forgiveness. For instance, when a pupil (or an educator) was found to have violated paragraph 200, the verdict was, "You were at fault. Too bad, it cannot be helped. May happen to anyone. Please do not do it again" (Korczak, 1967: 410). Paragraph 400, however, spoke of a serious fault and functioned as a last warning. Paragraphs 500, 600 and so on, up to 1000, supplemented this with other measures such as the publication of the trespasser's name in the home's newspaper, or, in the case of paragraph 900, being expelled from the home unless somebody is willing to vouch for you. Paragraph 1000 finally had the pupil expelled, with the right to apply for

readmission after three months. As far as is known, this, the severest of the sentences, was only administered once or twice in the thirty years of the history of the home.

The court consisted of a group of pupils that changed periodically. Any of the pupils who had not been seriously sentenced could become members of the court. The pupils filed complaints about each other when they felt they were treated unfairly. These complaints were then presented to the court, which heard defendant and prosecutor, and in the end gave its verdict. Within a few months after its establishment the court had already heard more than 3000 cases.

I mentioned that the law was also applied to the educators. In fact this was a fundamental aspect of Korczak's view. He felt that children not only have to live together among themselves in a just way but must also have the opportunity to stay free of any pedagogical arbitrariness. Korczak's Constitution was most fundamentally a law of respect between people. Respect implies that I as a person have my rights, e.g. to be who I am, but not at the expense of the other, who also has rights. So the law protects me by granting me my rights and thereby gives me freedom, but at the same time it limits this freedom by granting the same rights to others. It is the educator who has to guarantee that this law is maintained, Korczak stated, and this puts her in a two-sided situation, for the educator, who is responsible for the children entrusted to her, cannot place herself outside the law of respect. She is fully subject to it. The educator also has her rights, and longs to be who she is, but at the same time her actions are limited by others. Korczak said, "The limits of my rights and the child's must be fixed" (p. 136). So it's not surprising, from Korczak's point of view, that he himself appeared before the court a number of times, once, for example, because he had wrongfully accused a pupil of theft.

Korczak made this law the cornerstone of his constitutional outlook on education, but he was not dogmatic in its application. In the same way as he experienced failure and success in the summer camps, he had his ups and downs with the court. Korczak noticed that although the court treated an overwhelming number of cases, pupils still settled many of their disputes themselves outside the court. As Korczak subtly noted, this diminished the authority of the court, which in turn made it an instrument in the hands of the powerful within the group. He dismantled the court for a while and made a new start some months later (p. 448).

In his work with the court we see Korczak the experimentalist educator at his best. Fully aware of social implications, he searched for ways to organise group life justly, but his treatment of the means for attaining this end was undogmatic. His experiments with institutional justice are therefore not prescripts that must be followed. Korczak urged educators to find out what works for them, with the children currently in their care, under the present circumstances. His

educational methods were experiential, rooted in real life, and interpretative. "The child," he said, "is like a parchment densely filled with minute hieroglyphs, and you are able to decipher only part of it" (p. 87). Korczak emphasised that despite centuries of research and all our knowledge and skills, we stand before a great secret: the child. He challenged us to let go of our prejudices, to abandon practices not based upon authentic observation and interpretation, and to put respect, dialogue and participation at the centre of our work.

Being a follower of Korczak is therefore not a matter of copying his ideas. It is essential to keep in mind that Korczak was an experimentalist. He was not trying to construct educational theory or fixed methods, but was constantly exploring new ways of living with children under very unfavourable conditions. It would therefore be misguided to simply imitate Korczak and install courts of law in our schools. We, too, need to become experimentalists. It would be wise, though, to ask ourselves; What was the original idea behind his practices? How just are our schools, our after-school groups? How arbitrary are our actions as teachers and group leaders? To what extent are democratic principles instituted and practised?

From this perspective it seems that a lot of work must be done, for instance in relation to the notion of democratic citizenship, a most pressing matter at this moment in many countries. But it is also clear that in this matter Korczak was certainly not like a prophet, alone in the desert. His message of democratic, participative education is very much related to that of progressive educators like John Dewey (Tanner, 1997; Fishman and McCarthy, 1998; Berding and Miedema, 2001) and the dialectic approach of Lev Vygotsky (1986). Those who want to take the road towards real-life, experiential, co-constructive, inclusive and dialogical education will find an ally in Korczak. In fact in my country (the Netherlands) more and more schools and after-school centres take this to heart, and organise their programs in more democratic, participative ways. It is becoming customary to start a day's work at school with a meeting, with a pupil as chair. The programme for the day is discussed, and pupils are divided into groups that perform different tasks - investigating a problem, preparing a talk or searching on the internet. More and more we are becoming aware that children can learn much from each other, and that it is the stimulating social situation that both invites to learning and facilitates it. The teacher or group leader still has an important role to play – not as the "know-it-all" or the absolute authority, but as the one who guarantees that the law of respect is upheld, so that all members of this small community may realise their potential and no one is excluded.

In the end, according to Korczak, the question is: "Who can become an educator?" And his answer was: "She who understands that all tears are salty, can educate children. She who doesn't understand this, cannot" (Korczak 1979: 119). Ultimately all education comes down to the following: "Be true to yourself, seek your own road. Learn to know yourself before you attempt to learn to know the

children. You should realise what you are capable of before you begin to bring home to the children the scope of their rights and duties. Of them all, you yourself are the child, whom you must learn to know, bring up and, above all, enlighten." (Korczak, 1967: 248).

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