

# JANUSZ KORCZAK, AN INTRODUCTION

Dr Joop W. A. Berding, educationalist, assistant professor of education and former member of the board of the Janusz Korczak Association in The Netherlands

(an updated version May 10, 2017)

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 orphans from his Jewish orphanage sent from the Warsaw ghetto to the extermination camp Treblinka. Korczak became a leading advocate of children's rights and initiated educational practices of great contemporary relevance. In this introduction I present (1) a brief overview of Korczak's life, (2) the story of his apprenticeship as educator and (3) his main pedagogical ideas as expressed in his work in the orphanage.

## 1 Janusz Korczak: a life with and for children

Janusz Korczak was born as Henryk Goldszmit in 1878 or 1879 in a rather well-to-do, assimilated Jewish family in Warsaw, Poland. His father was a prominent lawyer who died in 1896 after a period of mental illness. The little Henryk was brought up by women (his mother, older sister and female tutors) and was the closest to his maternal grandmother in whom he found a confidant of his dreams. The atmosphere of the drawing-room depressed him. At a young age he learned that children are not always respected by adults or given the physical and psychological space to flourish. While at university, he aspired to be a writer and he entered a writing competition under the pseudonym “Janusz Korczak” – the name by which he is best known. He then decided to follow in his grandfather's steps and studied medicine.

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, 1967), 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.

He was a reflective practitioner; for him reflection on what it means to be an educator was central in his thought and actions. 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. 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.

## **2 Becoming an educator**

Korczak's shift from medicine to education took its most pronounced turn in 1904 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. 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.”*

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. The same at the holiday venue. 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.”*

The following year, at the new summer camp, Korczak tried a very different

approach. 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.

What did Korczak learn from these experiences? **First**, Korczak discovered that to speak of "education" in any acceptable fashion meant that the children themselves had to be involved. 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.

**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.

Dialogue, **thirdly**, 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 introduction – Korczak displayed an uncommon attitude of self-reflection, in an uncompromising way.

### **3 The democratic, 'republican' community**

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. Some children were street children (orphans), some came from poor families who were not able to feed or cloth them, and others came 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." Within the orphanage Korczak organised new institutions, or "educational arrangements" such as a children's parliament, an experimental school and a children's newspaper, The Little Review, the first newspaper in the world whose editorial board consisted entirely of children. He instituted many other new means of communication, such as a bulletin board, educator's and children's logbooks, a mailbox, the lost and found cabinet and so on.

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 law 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.” 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.

In 1924 Korczak wrote that the court was needed to be the guardian of law and order, to help educators teach behavior without shouting and hitting and that in fifty years, there will not be a school without it. 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. 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 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 educators in a two-sided situation, for educators, who are responsible for the children entrusted to them, themselves can't be placed outside the law of respect. Educators are fully subject to it. They also have rights, and long to be who they are, but at the same time their actions are limited by others. Korczak said, “The limits of my rights and the child's must be fixed.” So it's not surprising, from Korczak's point of view, that he himself was summoned to appear 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. He saw the orphanage as a little republic in which arguments were exchanged in public, for the good of the individuals but also to the good of the community (the **res-publica**) as a whole.

Korczak was not dogmatic in its application. “The child,” he said, “is like a parchment densely filled with minute hieroglyphs, and you are able to decipher only part of it.” 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. In the end, according to Korczak, the question is: “Who can become an educator?” And his answer was:

*“He who understands that all tears are salty, can educate children. He who doesn't understand this, cannot.”*

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.”*

## Sources

Berding, J. (1995) 'Meaningful encounter and creative dialogue: The pedagogy of Janusz Korczak', *Journal of Thought* 30 (4), 23-31.

Berding, J. (2013) *Becoming a citizen. The inspiration of Janusz Korczak*. In G.A. Krehl & R. Godel-Gassner (Hsg.). *Facettenreich im Fokus – Janusz Korczak und seine Pädagogik. Historische und aktuelle Perspektiven* (pp. 381-388). Jena: Garamond Verlag. (Edition Paideia - PSK 18)

Berding, J. (2016) *“Ik ben ook een mens.” Opvoeding en onderwijs volgens Korczak, Dewey en Arendt*. Culemborg: Phronese.

Korczak, J. (1967) 'How to love a child' in *Selected works of Janusz Korczak*, edited by Wolins, M. Washington D.C.: National Science Foundation.

Korczak, J. (1992) 'The child's right to respect' in *When I am Little again and The Child's Right to Respect*. Lenham, MI: University Press of America.  
Lifton, B.J. (1988) *The King of Children*. London: Pan Books.

**To contact the author**

[jwa.berding@ziggo.nl](mailto:jwa.berding@ziggo.nl) - [www.joopberding.nl](http://www.joopberding.nl) (with an English page) -  
@joopberding