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**Day Two: Philosophy, Pedagogy and Practice
Enriching Lives of Immigrant Children in the Spirit of Janusz Korczak
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Introduction

Janusz Korczak left us with many wonderful self-reflections based on his many years of work with children. He encouraged us to take every possible opportunity to observe, listen, and learn from children, to be as objective as possible with ourselves and to be flexible and ready to change. All this in order to create a learning environment that will prepare children not only to survive in the world but to be the beacons of change and hope for a better tomorrow. Although I live 100 years later, in a different country, many of the same issues that children were faced with then are present to a certain degree now all over the world. In the last 7 years, I became keenly aware that many of the children who go to the public schools in my suburban community are not living comfortable and peaceful lives and that their education is not preparing them for successes many of us in the US come to expect. With my medical and psychological background, it was time to embark on an educational project.

How it all began?

Janusz Korczak had something again to do with it. A few years ago, I received a pdf version of 13 beautiful posters from Israel depicting the story of Korczak, Wilczynska and the children in the Dom Sierot in Warsaw. I looked for places to show it: libraries, Holocaust and Jewish Community Centers, colleges, etc. The process was not easy; nobody I contacted knew who Korczak was and they were not ready to "risk" introducing him to their communities. Then I had a brilliant idea to create a Holocaust Remembrance

Celebration for children and adults in April of 2014 in my local library. The program was accepted and we were given a nice size conference room to display all the posters for a month before the celebration. To add something for children, we created a **Children's Reflection Corner** with questions for young people to answer. Some of the questions related to children's daily lives, others pertained to children's rights.

On April 24th, the celebration started with the program for children. One of the Shining Mountain's Center for Peaceful Childhood volunteers and her son, read the story of Janusz Korczak and showed the pictures from Tomek Bogacki's Champion of Children. The reading was followed by a beautiful **butterfly project**. Children, using materials from nature such as branches, leaves, and cones decorated and painted butterflies and wrote **wishes for the world** on each of them. The children took some of the butterflies home and some were sent to Korczakowo Camp in Poland for their butterfly project during the summer of 2014. The 2nd part of the celebration was for adults. We had an official tour of the exhibit, spoke at length about each poster and gave suggestions to the attendees about how to use the ideas in their organizations. The head of the Children's Department of the library was so moved by the program that she asked me if we could do something else for the children. I suggested that we could do the **Korczak Inspired Enrichment Program**. After few months of negotiations, we were allowed to bring a program in conjunction with an already existing Homework Help program. I sent an email to my friends, patients and anybody I knew to ask for volunteers. Ten people came forward: five of them first-generation immigrants themselves. We are lucky to have 3 people who speak Spanish. Among us are: a reading specialist, Waldorf teachers (Spanish/French, 1st grade, and handwork), Montessori teacher, air force nurse, Rabbi, Korczak educator, 8th grade student and business manager. For a person from outside, the program may look like a Waldorf (Steiner) or Montessori program. And yet, the program at its core is Korczak inspired. Let me explain why.

Location, location, location

We are in the old Holocaust Center that moved a few years ago to a local community college. I had a very hard time convincing the library staff that looking at Holocaust memorabilia is not healthy for young children. We managed to remove most of the

soldiers' and prisoners' uniforms, explicit pictures and plaques. What remains is a multiroom exhibit of children of the Holocaust located in the basement and the beautiful, large mural dedicated to 1,500,000 children who perished during WWII – how appropriate for Korczak's program! Across the mural are two flights of stairs ending on a small landing where we created a Welcome and Take a Break area and a door leading to our place in the attic. Parents bring children to a large room on the main floor of the building where children do their homework with the library staff and local high school volunteers. Parents wait up to two hours in the adjacent large room. The two rooms are austere, nothing on the walls, no books around and some old furniture and TVs scattered through the parts of the room in contrast to our room beautifully decorated, full of books, art, wooden blocks and puzzles, soft stuffed animals and dolls.

Who are the people we serve?

99% of the parents are immigrants, some legal, some not registered. They are from Ecuador, Dominican Republic, and Haiti. 50% of them are illiterate, they don't write or read in Spanish or Creole. They bring their children because they can't help them with their homework, they don't understand what is required of their children, and they can't even go to school to talk to teachers about them. Many of the children struggle with English, attention and real fears of deportations especially after our latest election. Many have problems with their vision and hearing and are not on healthy diets. They get school lunches that are not nutritious or to their liking so often they come hungry to the program. They have very little movement in school, no music or art and most of the learning is geared for state testing that happens twice a year.

East Ramapo Public School District is in the middle of a middle class neighborhood. Ten years ago it was one of the top public school districts in the country. Ten years ago we had an equal number of students attending public schools and private schools. In the past 10 years, these numbers have changed drastically. Currently we have 25,000 students in the private religious schools vs 8,900 public school children. Private school parents do not see it necessary to support the public school system and therefore for the past 10 years, the public school budget was defeated every year leaving the public schools with cuts in staff, art, music, English as a Second Language, etc. Our program is for the public

school children, 1st-6th grade. These children come with “big” histories. We try to learn about them as much as possible. Sometimes the history we learn about is painful to hear. I will give you an example. The day after President Trump was elected, it was a gloomy, rainy, cold day. It was quiet and very gloomy inside. The fears were palpable. Some parents did not even bring their children for fear of being arrested. Upstairs in our room, the mood was not much better. We had high school visitors that day so we started with teaching them our Five Star Program®. Afterwards I spoke to Anderson, a 6th grader, who normally is rather quiet and shy but that day he was exceptionally gloomy. He confessed that he is depressed about his inability to speak English after being in the US for 4 years. I suggested that he spend time with our Spanish speaking volunteer since she may be able to help him with his dilemma. They spent 30 minutes together and she learned an incredible story of loss, terror and posttraumatic stress on his 8 months journey from Ecuador to US when he was 9 years old. No wonder that he was scared that day – he confessed that he is scared for his parents and about a possible separation from them or the possibility of having to do the trip back to Ecuador. I wonder how many teachers in his school are aware of his history and the possibility that his learning issues may be connected to his PTSD?

It takes months for parents to feel comfortable with us. Their stories start coming when they learn that it is our love for their children that brings us together, that we are not being paid, and that some of us, immigrants ourselves, know that if their children don’t get the right education, they will not be able to grow up to manifest their highest potential. Once the “ice is broken”, the parents are ready to listen and learn.

Daily Routine at the Enrichment Program

The Enrichment Program runs from 3:30 pm – 5:30 pm while Homework Help runs from 4 pm – 5:30 pm. Some children are able to come before 4 pm. They run upstairs as fast as they can. They sign in, find their name tag that they created themselves the first day they attend our program, they drink some water, have a healthy snack (fruit and nuts) and come inside the room. Here they greet a volunteer by shaking his or her hand, introducing themselves and telling them one thing that they liked about school that day and how much homework they have. Each child’s birthday is marked on a wall calendar and

celebrated with a card with messages from all of us and a little “sacred” stone. We have a world map on the wall and each of us marks our name next to the arrow pointing to the country we are from or where our parents are from. Children start with the **Five Star Program®** and a few Brain Gym® movements that are good for their brains, eyes, ears and concentration and if the Homework Help Program did not start yet, they can play, otherwise they run downstairs to do their homework. While we wait for children to finish their homework, our Spanish-speaking volunteers go down to teach English (speaking and writing) to parents. Sometimes we have an art project for the parents. Sometimes parents bring their toddlers and we teach them how to play with their little ones, what toys are important to have, when to let the little ones play by themselves and when their assistance is needed.

As soon as older children come to the room, parents leave with the toddlers and we concentrate fully on the older children. We again do some movements and introduce them to a project we have for them. Most of the children love our projects. Some of the boys sometimes prefer to build using blocks or paper or play chess. We let all the children explore the materials, take their time, do something or just be. There is no pressure to do unless parents ask us to do more reading or math (more on that later). We would never know what incredible talents our children have if it were not for the quality of art materials we provide, ideas we give them and the total freedom they have to create on their own.

What do parents want:

Our parents want their children to learn whatever teachers ask them to learn which most of the time is facts and math. They want their children to succeed and get ahead. They are not used to educators who form a care circle around their child and have as number one priority for a child to connect with and reach his/her highest potential. They are not able to attend to their children’s inner life. They don’t pay attention to stomachaches before school or a test, headaches, sleepless nights, etc. Feeling sick or having a sore throat may not necessarily mean being really sick. Often something unpleasant happened in the classroom, a teacher shouted at another student, there was bullying or a physical fight and a boy or a girl feels sick. Parents need to be taught that in order to be healthy, a child

needs to have **a balance in his or her life**. That balance can be taught via Korczak's as well as Steiner's and Montessori's ideas where the **child is allowed time to wonder, to show gratitude, to feel responsible** for something, have an **urge to study something** just because they want to do it themselves and finally **to be able to be quiet by themselves**. These capacities are different from the usual facts and figures that are taught in schools and address the mind (brain). They have to do more with the heart, and unless encouraged and practiced, eventually will stay in the background.

Children are tired of reading and doing math but since the parents want that, we have to make it fun for them. We invited Waldorf school high school students to come to help with reading one on one. A child reads or is read to. Sometimes we use color glasses to relax their eyes and make the letters stand out. After reading for no more than 20 minutes, a child can play a game of his/her choice with the volunteer. Math is done via fun educational games, abacus, rhythmic songs or clapping.

How do we develop a sense of WONDER?

In our program, unfortunately since children "drop by" for short periods of time, there is no possibility for bringing a story of wonder to them or taking them on a walk at sunset or sunrise. We had to come up with a different approach. We know how austere their Homework Help room is and how over decorated with slogans are their classrooms. Our approach is to decorate the room with unusual items for these children: a salt lamp that glows with an orange tint, a diffuser that releases wonderfully smelling essential oils into the air, a pentatonic set of tone bars that make amazingly sweet sounds, a beautiful plant that needs to be taken care of. All our art projects are made of materials pleasant to the touch: tissue papers, different grades and texture of color paper, block and thick crayons, felts, yarns, etc. We try to evoke the sense of wonder through special day celebration such as making pysanki for Easter baskets, beautiful Mother's Day gifts, or lanterns for Chinese New Year. Our children appreciate beauty around them especially their own beautiful artwork displayed on the walls. They love to touch wood, yarn, felt, and enjoy different colors and shapes of wooden toys, not the usual plastic items from China.

Wonder needs to be also expressed inwardly. When we do our Brain Gym® movements, during one of them, we ask them to close their eyes and imagine some beautiful place

they would love to be right now. Many of them see themselves on the beach or on top of a mountain, some in Disney World or New York City. When they have time, they draw the scene after the exercise. When the movements are done before homework, they imagine themselves doing their homework, enjoying doing it, doing it well and having enough time to come up to the Enrichment Center.

Sense of wonder leads to learning that being in a beautiful environment makes one feel happier and more creative. No wonder that parents flock upstairs and are not happy to have to leave the room when their older children come in. I will address how we create beauty in their homes in the section about sense of quiet.

Next Step: Korczak took the kids for the night walk in the forest while at summer camp. Our plan is to take them for their first hike around a beautiful pond in a local state park. We are creating a Children's Discovery Trail with different themes for each year. The first year's theme will be Children's Rights.

How do we develop a sense of GRATITUDE?

Gratitude is easy for them. As one girl said, she loves to come to the Enrichment Center because she can do projects. At home, she has no materials to do the projects with – that costs money and her parents can't buy them for her. When we taught children how to do finger knitting, many boys asked for different colors of our beautiful yarns for home to make bracelets for their family members. They can't wait for next year when we will teach them knitting so that they can make scarves.

Many children feel that we are part of their family and they come to hug us when they are leaving and write sweet thank you notes when something touches them deeply.

The feeling of gratitude leads to a sense of love and participation. Without it, one is self-centered, caring only about how s/he feels, what s/he has and what s/he can do to benefit herself/himself. In our room we have a Gratitude Box and children leave notes about things they like about a particular person or project, our room, games or toys.

Next Step: We will start Thank You – Sorry log and each child will have the opportunity to enter something in it. Younger children who are not able to write, will draw a picture or will ask older children to write for them.

How do we develop a sense of QUIET?

One of the best gifts Korczak gave us was the fact that he did not want to be a teacher, he wanted to be the educator of children, a person who is able to bring out the best in children, to listen to them, to talk to them not at them, to learn from them, an adult in their lives who is able to change his views midway. As a pediatrician, he wanted to take care of the child's physical body, his gene makeup and his early childhood malnutrition and sicknesses, in the best possible way. As an educator, he wanted to create the best possible environment for a child to compensate for her/his hereditary makeup and early childhood environment that often had trauma, abuse and hardships. Korczak did not neglect the 3rd component of a child, her/his spiritual core. Although Korczak came from a Jewish background, he was not a religious man, he was a spiritual seeker. He knew that children needed something other than the material world to turn to when they were confused, sad or angry. He provided them with the opportunity to have a **Quiet Room** in Dom Sierot where they were able to be with God and themselves alone. How can we provide Quiet Places for children to just be? We created a **Take a Break Area (TAB)** for our program and **Sacred Space** for Home. When children are studying for more than 20 minutes or are getting distracted or angry, we encourage them to use the TAB area where they can experience inner peace: stillness, silence, calm. Pause, reflect, stop doing, just be for a short moment to be able to hear your inner voice. Look at the shell, stone, flicker of the light, connect with it, be still like the shell or a rock, feel the oneness with it, feel the love. The TAB area also provides a space for children to do sensory integration activities, journal or read something inspirational.

For home, children have their Sacred Space in a bag. Many of the kids we work with live in cramped spaces, some maybe have a bed of their own and a little space in a cabinet for their clothing. Having their Sacred Space in a beautiful bag under the pillow may be all they have as their personal possession. The bag is beautiful to look at, soft to touch and the little treasures bring a feeling of warmth, pleasure and beauty. They realize that even just a tiny little shell, stone or color paper is enough to brighten the space they are in and create peaceful feelings inside them.

The idea of taking a break needs to be taught to parents first. They push their children to succeed and don't understand that taking a break can have a big effect on their

children's learning. We strongly encourage 15 minutes of running or movement before doing homework but often that is not an option. We also strongly encourage using more encouraging words instead of constantly criticizing. We asked parents not to punish by squeezing arms or worst, hitting. We assure parents that their children are smart, that they can succeed especially when they are praised for work well done and when they are allowed to take a break in a special place, created just for them when they need it.

Next Step: Children will teach their parents how to add moments of quiet to their daily schedule. When we have an opportunity to take kids for a hike or a walk in the woods, we will teach them how to connect with a tree, how to feel its stillness and strength and how to be like a tree.

How do we develop a sense of RESPONSIBILITY?

It is interesting for us to notice the difference between immigrant children and non-immigrant children. In the immigrant community, more attention is being paid to younger siblings and cousins and although there is visible competition with cousins, there is also a sense that when something is going wrong for cousins, another child will come to his/her defense. There is also a visible gender difference. Although both boys and girls take care of their younger siblings or cousins, girls, from a large family, want to learn the task as best they can, they want to do it all by themselves and they also want to help others when we don't have enough volunteers. With time children realize that being responsible doesn't only mean to serve themselves but more importantly to serve others.

Teaching responsibility requires lots of our attention and reflection on the children's part. Many of the children don't learn that at home: washing hands after using the bathroom, drinking water, using tissue to wipe their noses, cleaning up after themselves. All that is easy to teach and when repeated daily becomes a healthy habit.

We have noticed that our kids love to work together, two, three, four together. When they do math games or spelling games, we ask them to check on each other: two play, two check the answers. Children learn that each has different abilities and that it is important to do the best with their own abilities and not compare themselves to others. We also encourage them to teach others when they excel in something, no matter how old or young the others are.

Responsibility goes hand in hand with the development of the will. To develop the will, one needs to be patient, it may take 15 minutes to organize pieces of a puzzle before beginning but these 15 minutes are precious for developing a strong will. Seeing a box organized or a corner of the room nice and neat and to know that “I” did it, brings big smiles on children’s faces. There are some children who would rather play than help to clean up. We give them a break and do it for them once. Next time if they are not willing to participate in the cleanup, they are told that they either have to change their behavior or they will not be able to participate in the program. We don’t have any children who are not willing to help.

With older boys, we listen to their wishes. They love to make paper planes so we bought modeling books and although we, the volunteers, have no clue how to do these planes, they help each other and from time to time come to us to read a difficult word in the instruction manual. When the kids wanted to learn origami and not one of our volunteers knew how to do it, we “hired” high school volunteers who are experts in that area and the kids learned to make many beautiful items. You can see how the love for learning is developing here every day and how the sense of social lessons is practiced. It is acceptable for an adult not to know something, and it is acceptable for a much younger person to be the lead in a particular activity.

Next Step: Since sense of responsibility leads to service, we will work with the children who are aggressive, passive or aimless to guide them to be more involved and share their “personal gifts” with others.

By developing wonder, gratitude, quiet and responsibility, we engage children in learning about themselves and their relationship to the bigger world.

Growth of the Volunteers and Final Reflection

One of the volunteers proposed to serve as a program coordinator. Every Monday, we receive a schedule for each day of the week with project ideas and the list of available volunteers. Another volunteer created a book with a record for each student with their age, grade, starting comments about their behavior, reading and math level. We have 75 entries in the book and we know that during very busy days, we missed entering many

new students. Everyday one of us tries to record an individual student's progress, project status and any other news about the child. Not all volunteers were familiar with the Five Star Program® at the beginning. Each received a copy of my book and they learned either from other volunteers or children. Each volunteer found their niche in the program and although it may have been frustrating to some not to know exactly what their assignments were, the idea was to leave them free to explore and see where they could be most helpful. One of the volunteers felt more useful working with the parents, another working with the toddlers. The instructions were simple: start with water, snack, short chitchat and the Five Star Program®. Leave it open to a student to do a project, play or do academics. If academics was chosen, remember to reinforce breaks every 20 minutes. The volunteer's role was to observe, act, reflect and act again. They were asked to be flexible since nothing stays the same. Here is a comment from one of the volunteers after the end of the year celebration: *"Today was beautiful! I am so proud to be a part of such an amazing group and such a sacred endeavor. God bless you all for your dedication and commitment to these families. I look forward to more wonderful things to come!"*

Next Step: When we are allowed to continue our program next school year, we are so much better off. We know what worked and what didn't work, we know what each of us is good at and what new things we would like to try next year. I for one know that there will be more work on children's rights, the Thank-you – Sorry log, positive daily affirmations, and parental education.

I end this musing with Korczak's poem and trust that many more children, parents, and volunteers will work together in the Korczak-Inspired Enrichment Program in years to come.

*"How many fields did you plow,
How many loaves of bread did you bake,
How much seed did you sow,
How many trees did you plant,
How many bricks did you lay,*

*How many buttons did you sew,
How many patches, how many seams did you make,
To whom did you give your warmth
who would have stumbled but for your support,
Whom did you show the way
without demanding gratitude or prize,
What was your offering,
Whom did you serve?"*