

Iwona Pawlowski

Janusz Korczak – education as a process of continuing exploration and creation

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Iwona PAWLOWSKI

Mark Twain Elementary Schoolm, Chicago USA

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Słowa kluczowe

Wielka Karta Praw Dziecka, Stary Doktor, sąd kalwiński, rada sądowa.

Streszczenie

Janusz Korczak – wychowanie jako proces ciągłego poszukiwania i tworzenia

Autorka artykułu stwierdza, że u podwalin pedagogiki korczakowskiej legły przede wszystkim trzy zasadnicze prawa:

- Dziecko ma prawo do dnia dzisiejszego,
- Ma prawo do tego, by było tym, czym jest,
- Dziecko ma prawo do szacunku.

Kolejno autorka przedstawiła „instytucje” wchodzące w skład Domu Sierot takie jak: Sąd Koleżeń-
ski, Rada Sądowa i Sejm. Scharakteryzowała tablicę zarządzeń, zawiadomień i ogłoszeń, szafkę
rzeczy znalezionych, sklepik, sieć dyżurów..

Key words

Magna Carta of Children's Rights, Old Doctor, Calvinist Court, Justice Council.

Summary

Janusz Korczak – education as a process of continuing exploration and creation

According to the author of the article, Korczak's pedagogy was underpinned by three basic rights:

- Children have the right to the present day;
- Children have the right to be what they are;
- Children have the right to be respected.

Further in this article the author presents the "institutions" that formed part of the Orphanage, such as the Peer Tribunal, the Justice Council and the Children's Parliament. She also describes the regulation, notice and announcement board, the lost and found cabinet, the small shop and the duty roster.

Working with children as a doctor, teacher or educator, Janusz Korczak, who often had to become a substitute family member for the orphans under his care, could understand very well the psyche of children and their psychological needs. Systematically collected material in the form of observations, notes and personal insights resulted in, over the course of time, numerous works dedicated to children and their needs upon which the Old Doctor placed particular emphasis, and that would later be described as a 'proclamation' of children's rights. Korczak was not only a fierce defender of children's rights, but also an educator who made huge contributions to the pedagogy of that time. He always stub-

bornly promoted and stood up for children's rights, and he tried to implement his ideas by providing the orphaned children an environment in which they could grow up and develop.

Janusz Korczak proved that when children are given the freedom to develop and when all developmental rights are taken into consideration, they can be brought up to be productive people. He gave his pupils the right to express themselves freely and to make independent decisions. He organized and oriented all spheres of their personalities.

Janusz Korczak recognized the dullness in the daily life of the majority of children, who burdened with so many responsibilities, could not enjoy the privileges that come with being children. Considering the above, Korczak produced the 'Magna Carta of Children's Rights', which unfortunately was not published in any combined form. The rights that can be found in various publications (which are a result of the author's in-depth thoughts) have never been prioritized and arranged in a chronological order. Korczak's pedagogy was based on the three following fundamentals:

- 1) Children have the right to the present day¹
- 2) Children have the right to be what they are²
- 3) Children have the right to be respected³

The above general rights reflect the depth of Korczak's thoughts and his approach towards children, and determine the direction of his pedagogical and educational work. The described rights were implemented and observed in the Orphanage both by the Old Doctor, his disciples and his associates.

The first of these rights has a very deep meaning. Korczak emphasized the fact that a child should be treated as our partner from the start. The child is not "a snout, it is not just a kid or a future human being", actually he/she is a human being at the very moment and not "a human being still to come".

The Old Doctor saw the unfairness adults injected into the world of children, their inappropriate behavior and their ignorance of the problems experienced by children.

"Adults ponder the future of children and make decisions, but no one will ask the children for their opinion and consent, assuming the children have nothing to say in this matter. We give commands and expect children to obey us. We give orders and make sure children fulfill them, depending on our will and the following reasoning – our children, our property – keep away from me. The children's doubts and reservations seem to be ridiculous"⁴. These words express the tragedy of many children brought up under the heavy hand of their caregivers, who impose upon them certain patterns of thinking and rules of behavior, ignoring their individual needs, interests and aspirations.

¹ J. Korczak, *Wybór pism pedagogicznych. Prawo dziecka do szacunku.* [Selection of pedagogical publications. Right of the child to be respected] Warsaw 1958, Volume I, p. 296.

² Ibid, p. 297.

³ Ibid, p. 293.

⁴ J. Korczak, *Wybór pism pedagogicznych. Prawo dziecka do szacunku.* [Selection of pedagogical publications. Right of the child to be respected] Warsaw 1958, Volume I, p. 285.

In a similar way we can analyze the second right, which is closely connected with the first one, by taking into account the individual needs, desires, will and interests of the child.

“Don't trample, don't kick a child around, don't make the child a slave of tomorrow, don't suppress, don't rush, don't urge” (...)

“Let children drink the joy of the morning cheerfully and let them trust. It is exactly what they want to do. A child does not consider wasted the time spent on a fairy tale, on talking to a dog, catching a ball, looking at a picture carefully or coping a letter, and everything is done in a kindly manner. It is the child who has the right”⁵.

The third right concerns the respect that the child, like all other human beings, are entitled to. Due to the very fact of being children, children should be particularly privileged by virtue of their little experience and effort they make to gain this experience. “Respect, if not humility, for white, bright, unblemished and holy childhood is needed”⁶. Although children have the right to be respected, in reality they are expected to do something or are prevented from doing something, and in this way their rights are violated. Janusz Korczak called for:

- *Respect for the child's ignorance,*
- *Respect for the work of cognition,*
- *Respect for failures and tears,*
- *Respect for the child's property and budget*⁷,
- *Respect for the mysteries and changes involved in the hard work of growing up,*
- *Respect for the current time and the present day,*
- *Respect for each individual moment, as it will soon fade away and never come back again...*⁸

This approach towards a child's problems proves that Korczak possessed a profound knowledge of a child's nature, and reflects mutual confidence, friendliness, affection and understanding.

The Old Doctor strove to provide children with conditions necessary for them to grow up into fully-fledged human beings.

On the basis of the general rights described above, the Old Doctor specified more detailed ones, that can be found in his works. They include among others:

- the child's right to education, school and books;
- the child's right to collaborate with an adult, to be independent and to judge their own actions;
- the child's right to be respected and to have their own secrets;
- the child's right to conduct a dialog with adults, to express their own thoughts and opinions;
- the child's right to personal property and mementos;
- the child's right to their own budget;

⁵ Ibid, p. 296.

⁶ Ibid, p. 303.

⁷ Ibid, p. 295

⁸ Ibid, p. 296.

- the child has the right to be mistaken and to cheerfully try to make things better.

These specific children's rights result from many years of diligent work in the area of pedagogy and education and from various analyses and reflections. Korczak, like no one else before, managed to find a detailed and thorough truth about the child's psyche and was the best ever known “doctor of children's souls”. The rights he called for, were not just empty words, but they met with a real response and they found their place in the education system applied by the Doctor.

The authorities, such as the Peer Tribunal, the Justice Council and the Children's Parliament, were established within the Orphanage. Their function was to implement the child's right to independence, the idea of collaboration and the right to make judgments about these rights. In the Orphanage one could also find: a box for letters and inquires, a news-sheet, a poll, a lost and found cabinet and individual lockers that implemented the right to personal property. “Children share in a painful way the financial problems of the family, they feel the shortages, they compare their own poverty with the affluence of their friends. They are really worried about being poorer by a few pennies. The child doesn't want to be a burden. What to do when you need a hat, a book, a cinema ticket and a notebook at the same time, or when the pencil is run out, when you have lost something or someone has taken something away from you? Sometimes you would just like to give somebody something nice, a keepsake, or buy a cake or simply lend your friend the stuff he(he) needs. There are so many important needs, wishes and temptations. The child's property is not a piece of junk, but the beggar's material, tools, hopes and souvenirs”⁹.

Paid duties and placing half of the Orphanage's total expenses at the disposal of the Self-government, were in some way, implementation of the children's right to their own budget.

The duty roster drawn up by the Doctor and the Self-government gave the children the opportunity to work, co-manage and cooperate with adults. Korczak was not however a pioneer in the field of children's rights. In 1923 the so-called *Geneva Declaration* was prepared. “The Geneva employers have confused the responsibilities with rights; the tone of the declaration is more of a persuasion than demand; it is an appeal to the goodwill, a request for kindness” – these were the Doctor's words expressing his opinion on the declaration.

The rights of the children community were regulated by Orphanage Regulations. Here is what they said: “The children owe obedience, not to the personnel, but to the rules that apply to them. The personnel should be familiar with these rules and stick to them”¹⁰. As we can see, Korczak considered the inmates and the tutors equal to each other. First of all he demanded from the tutors to be acquainted with the children's rights and responsibilities, and obey them strictly. Only when the tutor has carried out his(her) tasks properly and respected all

⁹ Ibid, p. 295.

¹⁰ Ibid, p. 294.

the rights himself (herself), was he(he) prepared to lead the children. While correcting the child's improper behavior the tutor could refer to the rights that applied equally to all inmates, although by virtue of the performed function, the rights of the tutor were slightly different.

Korczak saw a human being in the child. He gave the child quite a different role than the one accepted at that time. He did not treat the child as a passive and weak individual, but as an active, real co-creator of his(her) own fate, life and future.

Korczak was very consistent in his actions. He understood the meaning of modern pedagogy that included democratization of pedagogical relations. He treated the child as a full-value partner and granted him various rights necessary to meet the basic needs (the fundamentals of normal mental and physical development).

“Is there a life for joke? No, childhood – long years of human existence.”¹¹

Janusz Korczak was not only creator of the child's rights, but he was also very strict about obeying and applying all of these regulations in the centers for which he was directly responsible.

It was never easy for him. The beginnings of the Orphanage were also very difficult. Children who were used to completely different treatment could not find their place in this new situation. J. Korczak says: “Only much later did I realize the sentimental attachment of children to their previous life. In its chaos, gypsy poverty and nothingness of resources there was a space for free initiative, imaginativeness of single, intensive and short-lived efforts, daring of wild insubordination, bravado of strong action, need for self-denial, and carelessness about tomorrow”¹². The Old Doctor made the child the host, staff member and manager of the orphanage.

A regulation, notice and announcement board was placed on the wall where it was easily visible. It gave the tutors and the children a chance to display their initiative and forced everybody to think through the plan of their own undertakings. The board included a calendar, a thermometer, cuttings, pictures, charades, list of damage done and savings made by children etc.

The letter box was also of great importance. Korczak used to assume that sometimes it was easier to write something than to say it. According to Korczak, thanks to the letter box the children learned how to:

- wait for the answer: not straight away, not immediately;
- distinguish the irrelevant and short-lived sorrows, worries and wishes from the important ones;

Writing a letter requires a decision (it often happened that even the children who had decided to "post" a letter wished to take it back);

- think and be motivated;
- want to know.

Educators wondered whether written communication applied to dealing with children was not too official, but the Doctor's answer was: “In my opinion the

¹¹ Ibid, p. 293.

¹² Ibid, p. 221.

letter box doesn't make communication with children difficult, in fact it makes verbal communication even easier. I choose children who really need longer, informal, cordial or serious conversations. I can find a good moment to talk. The box saves time and makes our day last longer"¹³.

Every child should also be provided with his (her) own area, with a drawer or shelf to store their odds and ends. No one should forbid the children from collecting mementos, stuff of great importance to them. Children enjoy exchanging, giving away or selling their petty belongings. We should not show our reluctance towards it, let alone prevent the children from doing so. "If a pocket knife or a thong belongs to the child, why can't he (she) exchange it for a pencil case, magnet or magnifying glass? When we worry about fraudulent transactions, arguments or quarrels, let's introduce a notarial book to prevent the abuse"¹⁴. With each passing day, new stuff appears and some of the old belongings lose their value. Nevertheless, it should be the tutor's task to make sure that each and every child has something that is not the nameless property of the institution, but something that belongs to the child. The children should also be provided with a place where they can keep their belongings safely. The child must be sure that no one will take his (her) stuff away, once he (she) has put it into the locker. When the child mislays something, the tutor's responsibility is to help the child find it. For that purpose the idea of the *lost and found cabinet* was implemented in the Orphanage.

A quite important institution (part of the Orphanage) was the *small shop*. It helped teach the children to think about their needs in advance and remember them, as the shop was opened just once a day. Anyone who had forgotten something had to wait until the next day.

The Old Doctor devoted a lot of time to teaching the children to respect their own work, the work of their friends and tutors as well as the applied tools. Korczak also drew up a *duty roster*, that used to be quite popular with the children. Sometimes the pupil had to wait for their turn or they had to apply to be given a duty. This way there was always someone on duty. The children could also lodge a complaint against somebody who had performed his (her) obligations in an unsatisfactory manner. Such pupils lost their next turn and in order to get back on duty rotation they had to display a lot of diligence. Some of the duties were also paid.

"Despite the fact that only selected duties in the Orphanage are paid, in my opinion (quoting Korczak), all duties should be fully paid. Intending to develop good citizens we don't need to produce future idealists. The children who don't have parents are not at the mercy of the Orphanage and we don't have any right to demand something from them. For these reasons we have to teach the child, as early as possible, what money and remuneration for work are, so that they could feel the value of independence given by earnings and get to know the pros and cons of possession"¹⁵.

¹³ Ibid, p. 226.

¹⁴ Ibid, p. 227.

¹⁵ Ibid, p. 232.

One has to work hard to communicate with children properly. One of the methods of establishing a thread of understanding was the organization of *sessions*. These were serious, matter-of-fact meetings during which the children's comments were taken into careful and fair consideration, and various decisions and actions were undertaken. Children were never deluded with empty promises. The purpose of the meetings was to appeal to “the collective conscience of the group” and reinforce a sense of collective responsibility.

The *news-sheet* compiled by the children and the personnel served a similar purpose. It was a wonderful regulator of words and actions, a chronicle of work, efforts, mistakes and difficulties, a proof of capabilities, and evidence of action.

The most significant body functioning within the Orphanage however was the *peer tribunal*. Korczak says: “If I concentrate disproportionately on the tribunal, it is in full confidence that it may become a germ of granting the children equal rights, that it may lead to a constitution and result in the announcement of a declaration of children's rights. The child has the right to serious and fair consideration of his(her) problems. So far everything has depended on the good will or good or bad mood of the tutor. The child has had no right to protest. It is necessary to put an end to despotism”¹⁶. The peer tribunal had its own code and rules for suing. Its sessions were held once a week. The judges were appointed by a draw, from among the inmates against whom no action had been brought during the week. The judgments were made in accordance with the code. Some of them were examined by the Justice Council consisting of a tutor and two judges appointed by a secret ballot election for a period of three months. The tribunal also served other purposes, including maintenance of order or supervision over the fulfillment of responsibilities, pupils, personal property and health. After an earlier suspension and reopening of tribunal activity, the three following rules were introduced:

1. Anyone who is dissatisfied with the verdict has the right to appeal, one month after the verdict was issued;
2. Certain cases may be excluded from the tribunal proceedings and handed over to the Justice Council;
3. The children have the right to sue adults and the personnel.

Introduction of the above rules was a completely unprecedented move, as it protected the children from potential travesty of justice or lawlessness and despotism of the tutor. For the children it was a basis that enabled them to become mature enough to organize a self-government. Soon a Parliament, consisting of 20 members, was established. A group of five children formed one constituency. The person who received at least 4 votes became a member of the parliament, provided that he (she) had never been sued for dishonesty. The role of the Parliament was to approve or reject the rights enacted by the Parliament council. The Parliament enacted the right to a commemorative postcard. It was not only a award, but also a souvenir each child could receive

¹⁶ Ibid, p. 236.

by submitting a written application, stating the reasons for their request. The applicant made a list of acts and facts that he (she) wished to remember (including the good and bad ones, useful and harmful ones, and nice or unpleasant memories).

The inscription on the reverse of the postcard was: "By resolution of the Parliament of ..., (Name) was awarded a commemorative postcard for ...". Even today for many former inmates, this commemorative postcard is still one of the most precious souvenirs from their stay in the Orphanage.

Each child also had the right to silence and solitude, just as a patient has the right to peace. They had an individual separated area where they could isolate themselves from the rest of the group whenever they needed it.

The above brief description of the Orphanage reflects the main assumptions of Korczak's pedagogy. In his activity one can easily see a drive for the implementation of the children's rights. He pursued this goal by establishing and developing various bodies functioning within the Orphanage, or subordination of children and adults to the same rights and responsibilities. Fruits of his pedagogical efforts were not immediate. Although they had to be worked out and developed over the years, the chosen path proved to be right.

From among the various needs, the Old Doctor put special emphasis on the need for security, emotional contact and respect. All of these remain dependent on each other.

The need for security is the most basic need, considering the whole process of education. The child has little chance for normal development when the need for security has not been satisfied. Korczak managed to build an atmosphere of peace, confidence, mutual kindness and honesty in the institutions under his care. In this way he wanted to give the children a sense of security and meet this basic need previously mentioned. A child who feels secure, has confidence in adults and is trustful, has no difficulties in establishing relationships with others. The ability to establish interpersonal relations is another fundamental need that must be met. It is particularly important in childcare institutions, where the children live in a group much bigger than a family, and the ability to establish interpersonal relations is necessary for the group members to be able to live harmoniously together.

The need for emotional contact is closely connected with the need for love, friendship, collaboration, acceptance and belonging to a community. Therefore, the need for emotional contact is fundamental in the process of satisfying all psychological needs.

The aforementioned need is also strongly connected with the need for respect, since apart from respecting ourselves, we need respect from other people. Without establishing relations within a community, it would be impossible to satisfy this need.

Janusz Korczak carried out his own educational program based on the premise that in certain conditions, almost as importantly as family, the main factors that shape their personality are self-reliance and the initiative of children themselves. The educational system he applied was a naturalistic pedagogy

with the main focus placed on the child's personality and the child's right to individual and social development.

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