



Kinga Dziewiątkowska-Kozłowska

ORCID: 0000-0002-9392-7280

Kazimierz Wielki University

Toward the Child. Universalism and Timelessness of Janusz Korczak's Pedagogical Thought in the Face of the Post-pandemic Educational Reality of the 21st Century

KEYWORDS

dialogue, education, relationship, upbringing, online learning, Janusz Korczak, pedagogy

ABSTRACT

Janusz Korczak's pedagogical heritage is invaluable for all educational and upbringing activities undertaken in relation to children. In the age of the current pandemic experiences, the 21st century determined the adoption of a new direction in education which moves towards online learning. However, the task turned out to be much more difficult than initially assessed. In the face of the cognitive, emotional and social deficits and difficulties that are related to online education, Korczak's paedocentrism and its importance seem to be particularly pronounced. This text focuses on selected assumptions of Janusz Korczak's pedagogical thought which were made an inspiration and a starting point for reflections on the post-pandemic educational reality of the 21st century. The article emphasizes the essence of love and respect of the child as a superior value, as well as the role of dialogue and relationship as key elements of an effective educational process that supports the child's development. These Korczak inspirations were compared with the current level of children's and teachers' functioning, with reference to both research results and conclusions resulting from therapeutic practice. The author of the article indicates the high universality and timelessness of Janusz Korczak's pedagogical heritage, outlining the post-pandemic perspective of Korczak's educational space in the 21st century.

Introduction

The work of Janusz Korczak and his invaluable contribution to the fundamental development of the pedagogy of the child becomes a kind of the study of paedocentrism, appreciated by both theoreticians and practitioners of the 20th and 21st centuries. There is no doubt that Korczak's heritage is diverse and has multiple contexts (Smolińska-Theiss 2014). The universality and timelessness of Janusz Korczak's pedagogical thought encourages us to multidimensional reflection, especially in the face of the post-pandemic educational reality which includes numerous implications for the social-emotional-cognitive functioning of children, parents and teachers.

Can the work and activity of Janusz Korczak become an inspiration for the current dimension of functioning of the education system?

Can the effect of the pandemic contribute to strengthening Korczak's vision of the child and his/her needs in the education system?

I will try to answer the above questions on the basis of selected assumptions of Janusz Korczak's pedagogical thought. The assumptions shall refer to the areas such as relationship, upbringing and education. This paper is focused on selected inspirations and their meaning for the contemporary educational perspective, both in the theoretical and practical approaches.

Korczak inspirations

“There are no children, there are people” (Korczak 1987: 11)

The attempt to address the inspirations flowing from the work of Janusz Korczak becomes a significant challenge. The number of valuable works of the “Old Doctor” and the importance of numerous conceptual categories, both theoretical and practical ones, is so wide that it requires a strict conceptualisation and restriction to the key contexts that are the most significant from the point of view of this discussion. The solutions presented below expose the pedagogical thought of Janusz Korczak which is oriented towards three areas concerning upbringing, distinguished in this paper as key ones. These are:

- love and respect of the child as the basis for an educational relationship;
- upbringing as a form of supporting the child's development;
- dialogue as an educational method.

Love and respect of the child as the basis for an educational relationship.

The principle of love and respect for the child, who is perceived as the subject, should certainly be identified as fundamental among Janusz Korczak's ideas (Korczak 1992; Theiss 2012). Such thinking is deeply rooted in the framework of broadly understood humanism which implies a focus on the child as a person with full rights. According to Korczak, love and respect of the child becomes the basis for the educational relationship and the starting point for all educational influences. From this principle (which actually speaks of fundamental values in the context of the relationship with another person), further rights of the child defined by Korczak emerge, which are reflected in the educational context (Theiss 1992). Those rights do not always refer to children's strong points but they express the acceptance of their weaknesses and imperfections. Making mistakes is also an important part of the learning process; of gaining experience. Thus, in Korczak's thought, a child has the right to make mistakes, to reveal ignorance and to experience failures (Korczak 1984). In Korczak's view, a child is the kind of Master he/she is able to be. However, this Master is, at the same time, the one whom an adult wants to help. The adult wants to be with him and look through his eyes in order to understand him. The law of respect and love becomes a fundamental guideline in the context of an effective educational relationship taking place, in Korczak's view, both between the child and his/her parent, but also between the child and his/her teacher. It is because education is a close process of mutually interpenetrating components: teaching and upbringing. A child's educator can be both his/her teacher and their guardian (Chymuk 1995). The relationship built between the child and the adult becomes the starting point for supporting development. Thus, it is an extremely important value in the context of providing the foundation for the formation of optimum emotional-cognitive functioning. Regardless of whether we are talking about the family, educational or therapeutic environment, one common point becomes important: the subjective relationship which becomes the basis for all activities that are carried out.

Upbringing as a form of supporting the child's development

Janusz Korczak, fascinated by the dynamics of children's development, did not look for deficiencies or deficits in them. He focused on positive resources, active action, creative cognition and experience (Janiak 2015). This position, which viewed education as a process that supports development, was certainly a reflection of the humanist roots of the pedagogy of the interwar period. Referring to the essence of

upbringing as a form of fostering development, Korczak indicated the special importance of the child's right to care provided to him/her by adults (Korczak 1900). In Korczak's approach, a child does not always know where he/she is going. The child learns, experiences, and faces numerous desires and challenges. In the child's perspective, development is often seen as a difficult experience; in the adult's perspective, it is a hidden value, a mystery that the educator wants to discover in order to understand the child and their needs. The child's development in Korczak's perspective is like an open book or an endless space in which it is impossible to define unchangeable boundaries, fixed rules or methods of working with the child (Korczak 1993). Continuous observation of the child by an adult and educational activities undertaken in this context, which change dynamically and follow the child's needs, become the key to understanding the child's development. Thus, there is no doubt that, in Korczak's thinking, the adult should follow the child and participate in his/her development. This also becomes the basis for forming a relationship based on respect, love and acceptance, including the acceptance of shortcomings and imperfections. The educator, interested in discovering and learning about the child, trying to understand the crises experienced by the child and accompanying the child along the entire path of growth, becomes an extremely important element in the process of supporting the child's development (Korczak 2002). "The child – immensity, the child and eternity, the child – a speck in space, the child – a moment in time. Children – the barefoot proletariat; children – small people" (ibid: 21).

Dialogue as an educational method

Another basic assumption of Janusz Korczak, in his paedocentric vision of the child and the process of upbringing, is that education is the process of building a relationship between the educator and the student. The relationship perspective adopted by Korczak defines the child as an active subject; a partner in bilateral communication. Referring to the dialogue with the child as a method, he points out, above all, the essence of the attitude that the educator should adopt in this relationship (Bińczycka 2009, 2013; Tarnowski 1990). Korczak's vision of a dialogue is a combination of conversation with elements of guidance and narrative with philosophical overtones. It is an ongoing process of searching for the meaning and significance of the role of interpersonal communication (Kaminska 2012). Dialogue as an educational method is a form of contemporary thinking about upbringing, associated, to a significant extent, with humanistic, narrative or dialogue pedagogy (Smolińska-Theiss 2014). However, it should be mentioned that the concept of dialogue and its roots can also be found among the approaches of many philosophers who postulated the need to open

up to the other person and to the surrounding reality (Buber 1992; Kłoczowski 2005; Tischner 2005). It has become important here to see human existence in the context of an encounter which plays a significant role in understanding both oneself and others, and inspires the educational dimension. Dialogue is not reduced to mere conversation, but is a common and creative cognitive, emotional and behavioural process.

Janusz Korczak repeatedly emphasized that it is not only the child who learns from the adult, but also the adult who learns from the child, which is perfectly reflected in the sentence: "I learned something from everyone, and I learned the most from my students". It is because there are three dimensions to Korczak's concept of the relationship between the adult and the child: to teach the child, to learn with the child and to learn from the child (Theiss 1992). In Korczak's view of dialogue, knowledge flows mainly from the child to the adult, for the student stands higher than the teacher. Korczak's finding of truth, meaning and significance could only be achieved through dialogue. As Anna Kamińska writes, the acquisition of knowledge and Korczak's vision of finding the truth contained in it "is not born in the mind of an individual, but it blossoms among the participants of the educational process, in the course of their mutual dialogical encounter" (Kamińska 2013). Thus, partnership and two-way communication become a tool for the emergence of dialogue (defined, in Korczak's approach, as a specific type of an upbringing method) which, at the same time, becomes the key to mutual cognition.

Post-pandemic educational reality and thinking Korczak in the 21st century

There is no doubt that the Sars-cov2 virus pandemic has created numerous implications for the functioning of the entire educational system. It has affected particular people individually as well as entire structures holistically. It has disrupted the rhythm of work and study, it reorganised their form, introduced disharmony and instability of activities, and it forced the need for immediate adaptation to the changed environment conditions. A series of sudden changes included both children and adults. Everyone had to face the new dimension of education almost immediately. Parents, who had their own professional duties, had to organise and provide for their children while they were learning online from home. Teachers had to organise and implement online learning, which also required significant (and not just technical) reorganisation. There was no time for checking, getting to know each other, gradual familiarisation or the application of the small steps method. For everyone, it was a new, sudden and unexpected situation with which they had to cope immediately. A situation for which no one had been prepared.

According to the data from the report of a nationwide survey on remote education in the time of the Covid pandemic (Plebańska, Szyller, Sieńczewska 2020), it was shown that teachers have a low knowledge of how online teaching should take place. Most teachers indicated that they felt there was a lack of preparation for online learning. The authors of the report indicate the following shortcomings related to such learning:

- insufficient technological preparation (i. e., the lack of adequate equipment or stable Internet connection);
- inadequate methodological preparation (i.e., difficulty in adapting traditional classes to online classes, insufficient tools, contents and methods used in remote learning);
- inadequate digital competences (ibidem: 14).

The research results indicate that during the pandemic teachers mainly limited their role to the assignment and revision of students' homework. Meanwhile, it is assumed that, in the age of remote education, the teacher should take the role of a facilitator and a tutor rather than follow a one-sided model of communication, limiting it to the lecturing system. However, the conclusions drawn from the research are clear: the vast majority of teachers mainly assumed the role of "commissioners of works" and "supervisors of their fulfilment" (ibid: 16). Nevertheless, it is also true that most teachers reported a lack of external support. This need, however, has been drowned out. It is because, in the new mode of online learning, the challenge including the fulfilment of the core curriculum has become a priority. In addition to the strictly cognitive area, however, there remains the emotional-social dimension of the educational process including the very important relationship between the teacher and the student. For it should be remembered that, as Boguslaw Milerski and Boguslaw Śliwerski emphasize, "education cannot be limited to the transmission of knowledge. It is a dialogue in which both parties (educator-teacher and pupil-student), using the cultural heritage of a given society, not only exchange information, but also reveal and fulfil ethical, aesthetic, and religious values in their relationship" (Milerski 2000: 54).

Korczak's concept of partnership in the post-pandemic educational reality

How has remote learning affected the process of caring for a child's development, education, and for the teacher-student relationship? From the perspective of a practitioner: a teacher, psychologist and sociotherapist, I can definitely say that the pandemic and the accompanying time of remote learning has significantly influenced all those who participated in the process of online education, bringing with it numerous

deficits in social, emotional and cognitive competences. Remote learning has significantly affected the quality of the child-adult relationship, especially the quality of the student-teacher relationship. The way in which students assess teachers for conducting remote classes forces us to reflect on it. This is especially puzzling when we reach for the critical analysis of sources. It is because it turns out that the theory of dialogue in education is common and often indicated as a superior value (Gołębnik 2003; Kamińska 2013; Klus-Stańska 2005, 2020; Okońska 2008; Śnieżyński 2005). However, taking into account the results of the research, one may have the impression that such a theory is not reflected in practice. The two-subject dialogue between teacher and the student has been lost in remote education. The data clearly shows that children spent dozens of hours a week in online learning, doing the tasks assigned by the teachers. At the same time, according to the students' declarations, their greatest difficulty and limitation was the lack of support from teachers and the inability to obtain help in the absence of knowledge and skills of their own to fulfil certain tasks (Plebanska et al. 2000). The degradation of the teaching process to a remote form brought a transformation of the student-teacher relationship into a virtual perspective, separated from direct emotions and reactions, limiting space and openness, inhibiting the natural freedom of communication, and inducing an evasive mode of functioning. Turning off the cameras, reluctance to answer, inactivity during the lessons, a tendency to skip classes – this is nothing more than a gradual, slow degradation of the communication process, further destroyed by a reduced level of motivation (Ptaszek, Stunża, Pyżalski, Dębski, Bigaj 2020). The lack of communication is undoubtedly a big step towards the lack of relationship. The inadequate technical and professional preparation of teachers, and the lack of help and support felt by both children and teachers only increased the regression of the relationship. Dialogue, which, in Korczak's thought, is the basis and the means of upbringing, now begins to arouse anxiety. We have been so focused on striving for the correct or technically adequate implementation of the new form of teaching, that we concentrated our efforts on the new intellectual challenge, but we lost what is the most important: the emotional component of the teaching (and upbringing at the same time) process, i. e. the relationship with another person; the relationship with the child. In the light of the pandemic, didascalocentrism has dominated the paedocentric vision of didactic and educational interactions. The concern for the development of the student and his/her emotional needs (which are clearly visible now) has been lost. In the post-pandemic reality we can see that those needs were not satisfied at all. In the face of distance learning we all need support, and we feel this need more intensely than before. However, it is important to reflect on the fact that if the external support network is not working on the part of educators and teachers, this lack will also be felt on the part of students.

“Get to know yourself before you want to get to know children. Become aware of what you are able to do before you start assigning rights and duties to children. You yourself are a child whom you have to know, bring up and educate first” (Korczak 1984: 217).

A student is an attentive observer of educational reality. He experiences, learns and feels, also when something happens not as it should, or differently than it was before. He tries to understand the new reality, but he cannot. The limited process of social contact definitely fails to improve the situation. The child feels the need for a relationship, but he/she is not able to build it immediately, in a new way. It is difficult. Too much changes; not enough stability. Too much uncertainty; not enough security. The student feels lost; he/she tries to find himself/herself again, but they fail. All the more, today Korczak’s Master needs to feel the presence of a companion in his development; a partner in the process of upbringing, who will take him seriously; who, instead of trivialising, will try to understand his fears and overcome his crises. Such a companion would be a support, a tutor and a mentor. If necessary, he/she would show the child possible routes and suggested solutions. The Master is the one whom the adult sometimes needs to help. What can a teacher do today to help his/her student? Be inspired by Korczak’s message. Go towards the child. Hear their needs. Implement the teaching process in a partnership (subjective) manner, bearing in mind that:

- upbringing is a form of supporting the child’s development and is significantly included in the process of education;
- full educational relationship is only possible when it is based on love and respect of the child;
- dialogue is the basic link in the educational relationship and constitutes one of the main educational methods.

“A good teacher, who does not force, but frees; does not pull, but lifts; who does not press, but shapes; who does not dictate, but educate; who does not demand, but asks – will experience many inspiring moments with the children” (Korczak 1998: 86).

The vision of the post-pandemic educational reality presented in this discussion is undoubtedly contained within the realm of wishful thinking; in the context of the permanent rooting of Korczak’s philosophy and striving for a three-factor perception of the educational process contained in the scheme: dialogue-relationship-education. In this approach, educational reality becomes a developmentally supportive space, sensitive to the needs of the child. It is a reality of relationships, becoming, in fact, a complex didactic and educational process based on very simple assumptions: love and respect, dialogue and relationship. What was missing during online learning is definitely needed today: a paedocentric, and not a didascalocentric, orientation.

A teacher, a pedagogue, an educator in the post-pandemic educational reality can teach the most important thing: how to become a Korczak in the 21st century. What can we do become a Korczak?

We can look Korczak;
think Korczak;
and speak Korczak.

Bibliography

- Bińczycka J. (2009). *Spotkanie z Korczakiem*, Olsztyn: Olsztyńska Szkoła Wyższa im. J. Rusieckiego.
- Bińczycka J. (2011). *Dialog w wychowaniu*, [in:] Smolińska-Theiss B, (ed.) *Rok Janusza Korczaka 2012. Nie ma dzieci — są ludzie*, Warszawa: Biuro Rzecznika Praw Dziecka.
- Buber M. (1993). *Ja i Ty. Wybór pism filozoficznych*, trans. J. Doktor. Warszawa: Instytut Wydawniczy Pax.
- Chymuk M. (1995). *Janusz Korczak. Dziecko i wychowawca*, Kraków: Wydawnictwo WAM.
- Gołębiak B.D. (2003). Szkoła – kształcenie – nauczyciel, [in:] Śliwerski B., Kwieciński Z. (red.). *Pedagogika. Podręcznik akademicki*, cz. 2, Warszawa: Wydawnictwo PWN.
- Janiak A. (2015). *Wychowanie dziecka w pedagogii Janusza Korczaka*, Lublin: Towarzystwo Naukowe KUL.
- Kamińska A. (2012). *Dzieło pedagogiczne Janusza Korczaka jako przykład Lévinasowskiej wrażliwości na Innego*, [in:] Lubińska-Bogacka M., Banach M. (ed.), *Jestem nie po to, aby mnie kochać, ale po to, bym ja działał i kochał. Dzieło i życie Janusza Korczaka*, Kraków: Oficyna Wydawnicza Impuls, 156.
- Kamińska A. (2013). *Korczakowski dialog z dzieckiem — inspiracje filozoficzne*, [in:] Smolińska-Theiss B. (ed.), *Rok Janusza Korczaka 2012. Nie ma dzieci — są ludzie*, Warszawa: Biuro Rzecznika Praw Dziecka.
- Klus-Stańska D. (2018). *Paradygmaty dydaktyki. Myśląc teorią o praktyce*, Warszawa: Wydawnictwo PWN.
- Klus-Stańska D., Nowicka M. (2005). *Sensy i bezsensy edukacji wczesnoszkolnej*, Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Harmonia.
- Kłoczowski P. (2005). *Filozofia dialogu*, Poznań: Wydawnictwo W drodze.
- Korczak J. (1984). *Pisma wybrane*, vol. 2. Warszawa: Nasza Księgarnia.
- Korczak J. (1987). *Myśli*, Warszawa: Państwowy Instytut Wydawniczy.
- Korczak J. (1900). *Dzieci i wychowanie*, „Wędrowiec”, issue 1.
- Korczak J. (1993). *Momenty wychowawcze*, [in:] Korczak J. (ed.), *Dzieła*, vol. 7, Warszawa: Oficyna Wydawnicza Latona, 1993.
- Korczak J. (1998). *Jak kochać dziecko*, Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Jacek Santorski.
- Korczak J. (2002). *Jak kochać dziecko. Prawo dziecka do szacunku*, Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Żak.

- Milerski B., Śliwerski, B. (2000). (ed). *Pedagogika. Leksykon PWN*, Warszawa: Wydawnictwo PWN.
- Okońska E. (2008). *Co z dialogiem w szkole?* „Forum Dydaktyczne: Przeszłość, Teraźniejszość, Przyszłość”, issue 3/4.
- Plebańska M., Szyller A., Sieńczewski, M. (2020). *Raport – Edukacja zdalna w czasach Covid*, Warszawa: Wydział Pedagogiczny UW.
- Ptaszek G., Stunża G., Pyżalski J., Dębski M., Bigaj M. (2020). *Edukacja zdalna: co stało się z uczniami, ich rodzicami i nauczycielami?* Gdańsk: Wydawnictwo GWP.
- Tarnowski J. (1990). *Janusz Korczak dzisiaj*, Warszawa: Wydawnictwo ATK.
- Tischner J. (2005). *Etyka solidarności*, Kraków: Wydawnictwo Znak.
- Smolińska-Theiss B. (2014). *Korczakowskie narracje pedagogiczne*, Kraków: Oficyna Wydawnicza Impuls.
- Śnieżyński M. (2005). *Sztuka dialogu. Teoretyczne założenia a szkolna rzeczywistość*, Kraków: Wydawnictwo Naukowe Akademii Pedagogicznej.
- Theiss W. (2012). *Dziecko to człowiek. Pedagogiczne dziedzictwo Janusza Korczaka*, „Pedagogika Społeczna”, 4.
- Theiss W. (1992). *Postowie*, [in:] Korczak J. (ed). *Jak kochać dziecko*, Warszawa: Agencja Wydawnicza Jacek Santorski.

ADDRESS FOR CORRESPONDENCE

Kinga Dziewiątkowska-Kozłowska
Kazimierz Wielki University
e-mail: kinga_dziewiatkowska@wp.pl