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The Child-Learner and His/Her Needs From the Perspective of Female Primary School Teachers and With Janusz Korczak's Pedagogy in the Background

Dziecko-uczeń i jego potrzeby – z perspektywy nauczycielek szkół podstawowych i pedagogią Janusza Korczaka w tle

KEYWORDS

teacher, teachers' perception of learners, child's needs, child in Korczak's pedagogy, objectification of students

ABSTRACT

The main objective of the article is to present the perception of children-learners and their needs by female primary school teachers. The research problem concerns teachers' perception of students and their needs revealed in teachers' narratives. The research data was collected during informal qualitative interviews. The argument starts with Janusz Korczak's selected theoretical views. Subsequently, the participants', i.e. primary school teachers' perspectives on a child-learner and his/her needs were presented. The analysis of the participants' responses indicates that they see children-learners as objects to be formed, and they support the hierarchical teacher-learner system. Implementing the need for constant control and external stimulation, as well as limiting children's freedom, is far away from the democratic and developmental perspective of schooling impact and Korczak's system of anti-authoritarian influences.

SŁOWA KLUCZE ABSTRAKT

nauczyciel,
postrzeżenie ucznia
przez nauczycieli,
potrzeby dziecka,
Janusza Korczaka,
uprzedmiotawianie
uczniów

Głównym celem artykułu jest ukazanie postrzegania dzieci-uczniów i ich potrzeb przez nauczycielki szkół podstawowych. Problemem badawczym jest pytanie dotyczące ujawnionego w świetle nauczycielskich narracji postrzegania dziecka-ucznia i jego potrzeb. Materiał badawczy zgromadzono drogą wywiadów swobodnych o charakterze jakościowym. Wywód rozpoczęto przedstawieniem wybranych ustaleń teoretycznych Janusza Korczaka. W dalszej kolejności ukazano postrzeżenie dziecka-ucznia i jego potrzeb przez badane nauczycielki. Analizy ich wypowiedzi ujawniły, że postrzegają one dzieci-uczniów jako obiekty do formowania i podtrzymują hierarchiczny układ nauczyciel–uczeń. Realizując potrzebę ciągłej kontroli, zewnętrznego stymulowania i ograniczając swobodę swoich podopiecznych, pozostają z dala od demokratycznej i rozwojowej wizji oddziaływań szkolnych oraz od Korczakowskiego systemu antyautorytarnych oddziaływań.

Introduction

In this paper, I will present a narrow section of the analysis of data collected through qualitative interviews as part of a wider research project the main idea of which is to reach out to everyday teaching experiences in order to describe, analyse and interpret their meanings. The chosen path of obtaining research material is related to the naturalistic approach to the world and the humanistic way of empirical cognition of social phenomena, of which Florian Znaniecki was one of the first promoters. He recognised that scientific penetration of social reality makes it possible to reach real human experiences and read their meanings. It is mainly through the interpretation of what the researched teachers tell about their experiences that the researcher can reach the elements of this reality (Znaniecki, 2008). Following this approach, I conducted my research in an interpretative paradigm, aiming to discover the meanings attributed by female teachers not only to everyday events, but also to people from their work environment. In this article, I look at the child-student and their needs from the perspective of teachers' narratives, sharing the thesis of Gunilla Dahlberg et al.¹ (2013) that the constructions of both categories held by the female teachers studied (as a product of meaning-making processes) (Stainton Rogers, 2008) influence the practices they undertake.

Moreover, I will confront the perceptions revealed and the actions of the interviewees uncovered through analyses of the data collected with some of the assumptions

¹ According to G. Dahlberg, P. Moss and A. Pence (2013), pedagogical actions are a product of how the child is perceived and understood.

of Janusz Korczak's pedagogy. I relate the choice of Korczak's optics of perceiving the child to the fact that he is recognised as the pioneering author of an extremely comprehensive and up-to-date study of the nature of the child. Korczak is the one "who delineated an interdisciplinary framework for knowledge about the child, obliging pedagogues to use the results [of his – M.Z.-B.] research" (Śliwerski, 2007, p. 31).

Outline of the Research Methodology Used

The purpose of this article is to show how the female teachers surveyed perceive their students and their needs. In accordance with the interpretative paradigm adopted, the determination of the aim and research problems occurred in the course of following the data emerging from the empirical material collected (by means of in-depth² qualitative interviews (Konecki, 2000)) and analysed. In the course of the multidirectional analyses of the statements of the participating female teachers³, one of the overarching categories that emerged (Gibbs, 2011) turned out to be the student, and within this, the teacher's perception of the student and his needs.

The analysis of the collected data started already at the transcription stage ("word for word" – Gibbs, 2011, p. 118), and consisted of formulating analytical insights and recording them in the form of notes. The procedure of encoding meanings was preceded by determining the content range of the interviewees' statements and discovering their partial meanings without isolating them from the narrative as a whole. This was followed by a search of the transcriptions in order to assign a code or label to the data (Charmaz, 2009), which made it possible to code those parts of the text that dealt with the same issue, phenomenon, idea, activity, or that illustrated the same case. This led to the creation of a grid of major thematic codes.

This was followed by a more analytical and theoretical level of coding, which provided an opportunity to expand and refine the generated codes, grouping and arranging them in a hierarchical order. Categories of superordinate, subordinate or equivalent nature were exposed and the actual comparative analysis began. This consisted of comparing between individual teachers the information about events in their

2 In addition to the interview-initiating question, the interviews mainly involved questions that were imposed in the course of the conversation. In order to deepen the understanding of the statements obtained, interviewees were encouraged to talk without pressure (Kopciwicz, 2009).

3 The selection of female interviewees was done using the snowball method (Babbie, 2008) and consisted of the interviewed teachers indicating the next female interviewee. This way, it was possible to reach 14 female primary school teachers teaching grades 1–3 (7), as well as mathematics (1) and languages: Polish (4), English (1) and French (1). The definition of the sample in the research conducted in the interpretative paradigm was related to the exhaustion of the outcome field during the research (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2000).

professional lives, situations, people, places, etc. The next stage of the analysis was focused coding, which aimed to make the extracted codes (which still had a descriptive dimension) more analytical and theoretical.

The Child and His/Her Needs in the Perspective of Janusz Korczak

To this day, Korczak's integral vision of the child is considered timeless. While the various spheres of reality in which the child is embedded are constantly changing, the nature of the child as described by him seems unchanged. In the light of the above, and in view of the issue of the teacher's perception of the child-student raised in this text, it is worth quoting some of Korczak's findings concerning his perspective built on the basis of many years of thoroughly conducted studies. On the basis of his research, Korczak broke with the view of the child as an object of adult manipulation, a passive being to be shaped according to externally created models and filled with information about the world. In his view the child became a subject of his/her own activity; a subject which develops on the basis of experiencing reality. This kind of cognition and natural curiosity about the world are inscribed in the nature of the child who "not being nothing, wants to be everything [...]; walks on all fours and barks to find out how the animals are doing, [...]; runs after the glass burning in the sun, listens to what hums in the shell, hits the stone against the stone. Everything he can find out, he wants to see, to test" (Korczak, 2002, p. 102). One can conclude that the child's proper way of learning about reality is through activity triggered by inner curiosity, learning through observation and experience. In Korczak's opinion, the child's cognition of reality should be accompanied by independent effort, because then his innate desire to explore the world develops, as well as the possibility to derive satisfaction from it and experience self-fulfillment. He expressed this conviction in the words: "If you can diagnose the child's joy and its intensity, you must notice that the highest is the joy of a difficulty overcome, a goal achieved, a mystery discovered, the joy of triumph and the happiness of independence, mastery and command" (Korczak, 1958a, p. 118). Nowadays, the conviction thus described is widely shared by theorists and researchers of childhood who recognise that the child develops mainly through experience and his/her own exploratory activity (Walożek, 2015).

Janusz Korczak, as a proponent of the need for the child to learn according to his or her individual abilities, appealed for the creation of appropriate conditions for this, taking into account the satisfaction of such needs as love and acceptance, respect for the effort of learning and growth, for ignorance or weakness, and so on. (Korczak, 1957). As an advocate of reading and understanding children's needs and

the mechanisms that guide their behaviour, he also insisted on respecting the child's rights to: self-determination, property, movement, play, work and research, justice and secrecy. Noting the child's peculiar way of adapting to the world and coping with reality, this pedagogue was particularly convinced of the child's agency, which is not limited by intellect but by lack of experience. He told about this in the words such as: "In the realm of feeling, the child surpasses us in strength by not putting on the brakes. In the field of intellect he is at least equal to us, only he lacks experience" (Korczak, 2002, p. 85). The basis of Korczak's conviction concerning this agency was faith in the child and the resulting trust in the child, which was manifested in the system of self-governing and democratic education he created. It should be noted that chaos and anarchy had no place in this system. Alongside upbringing in freedom (manifested in the child's right to gain independent experience of the world, including the right to wander and seek the right paths) there was a kind of discipline, which was not imposed from outside by the teachers, but took the form of self-control. Freedom was accompanied by responsibility for the choices made and actions taken. On the nature of these processes, the Old Doctor (Korczak's nickname) wrote: "Decision is a strenuous process of voluntary sacrifice with increased responsibility for the outcome. The imperative applies only externally. Free choice – internally" (Korczak, 1958a, p. 53). The child's need to try to combine freedom with responsibility is considered an important element of subjective development. According to Danuta Waloszek, already in early childhood there is a need to build the concept of "oneself in the world and the world in oneself" (2009, p. 211). Asking the question about the meaning of child responsibility, the author states:

The child as someone (a person) acts. As an active person, he or she is able to decide on the place, the means, the methods, the partner of action. He/she masters the situation as much as he/she can. In this sense, by the very fact of organising the action, he or she is responsible for the actions and their result (Waloszek, 2009, p. 213).

The above findings (although selectively chosen due to the obvious limitations of the volume of this paper) provide valuable guidance for today's teachers. It is worth adding that Korczak's vision of the teacher was strongly associated with a subjective and personal approach to the pupil, with a focus on knowing and understanding the nature of the child and his or her needs, and acting in accordance with this (Korczak, 1978).

The Child-Learner From the Perspective of the Female Teachers Surveyed

In the light of the analyses of the teachers' statements, the pupil does not appear as the subject of their own or joint educational activities. This is revealed not only in the descriptions of the professional everyday life of the female teachers surveyed (school situations and events), but also in the way they describe their pupils. One of them refers to her pupils as plastic objects that can be formed (moulded) according to the existing patterns:

[...] they are just shaping up and you have to give them some form as well. [...] there simply has to be some kind of *ordnung*, that is, some kind of discipline [French teacher].

The quoted interviewee argues that children should not be given too much freedom either in the educational or upbringing space.⁴ She shares the approach common among the women interviewed, i.e. that students should be disciplined. Discipline appears as a tool of domination over the student who should submit and achieve the goals and tasks that the teacher sets. This is illustrated by the following words of another of the respondents:

They are consistently expected to do what I expect of them. Even if I was to fall down and stop talking, I just... I just demand it [...] [primary school class teacher in grades 1–3].

The maintenance of discipline is helped by certain “rituals” that regulate the functioning of pupils at school.⁵ These rituals are also ways of making students subordinate to the teacher who is to dominate them. This is shown by the statement of another teacher:

[...] there is a bell and [the students – M.Z.-B.] have to quiet down, they have to line up in pairs. [...] there are organisational activities, i.e. checking attendance, announcing the topic, [...] although not always to the end, because I sometimes let the students come up with a topic after the lesson and it still gives them incredible satisfaction that I write the topic they came up with into the class register [Polish language teacher].

4 The restriction of freedom is strongly evident in the case of content discussed (and set top-down) in lessons with students.

5 In examining school rituals, Peter McLaren (1999) identified five types of rituals, namely: micro-rituals, macro-rituals, revitalisation and intensification rituals, and resistance rituals. For the most part, they aim to sustain and reproduce the school order.

In the perspective of the above statement, school has the characteristics of a hierarchical institution in which the pupil is expected to take certain actions and behave accordingly following a certain signal. In such a school, the child has no voice; rarely and only with consent he/she has access to spaces reserved only for the teacher, and he/she decides what is important from the teacher's point of view (as, for example, in the passage under discussion: the topic of the lesson). The child is a subordinate who follows orders, allows himself/herself to be controlled and follows certain rules. From an early age he/she is trained in subordination to a superior person. In the quoted narrative excerpt, verbs are present that express the pupils' compulsions or necessities as "natural" elements of their school life. The teacher incidentally allows them to carry out certain activities reserved for the dominant person – able to dictate the topic of the lesson, and otherwise in command of assessing the students' activities and noting this in the register, which here appears to be an attribute of the teacher's power.

The objectification of students is evidenced by other statements made by the interviewees. In their narratives, they talk about breaking students down, straightening them out (especially when they go beyond established patterns of behaviour or escape the expectations set) or correcting them. When students rebel against this, the teachers get frustrated.

While describing their daily practices, the interviewees reveal a tendency to push students into patterns. More often than not, this takes the form of training the children to solve tasks typical of those posed to them in external examinations or competitions, with the aim of developing automaticity in dealing with them:

[...] when they sit down to take this [test – M.Z.-B.] proper, it's another test in a series for them, not the first or second... and they're supposed to do it already – not to put it nicely – like robots, yes [Polish teacher].

Such actions by female teachers again expose the objectification of pupils, transforming them into properly functioning machines – robots which can successfully perform a learned activity and face familiar challenges (tasks).

The Child-Learner and His/Her Needs

The interviewees' perceptions of the pupils' needs also become apparent in the light of the narrative. Alongside "moulding" and disciplining comes the need to "tame" the child. It is worth noting that this often happens against the child's nature and is not related to the fulfillment of his/her true needs, which I think is well demonstrated in the following excerpt from one of the interviewees:

Well, it's hard [...] working with these children, because they're moving all the time, they're spinning around. I had one such Peter and I say: 'Peter, I think I'm going to record what I'm saying all the time. Peter, sit; Peter, write'. Then, when I looked at him, I couldn't speak anymore, but Peter already knew and said: 'OK, OK, I'm sitting down right now' [primary school class teacher in grades 1–3].

Based on the above description, it is possible to see that children's natural need to move and be physically active is being restricted and they are being accustomed to conforming to rules, which are traditionally understood as certain objective necessities. It is worth noting that in the reported (and repeated) situation, the child does not have the opportunity to actively satisfy his/her individual cognitive needs as he/she sits at the desk and only performs activities ordered by the teacher. In the next few sentences, the above-quoted interviewee expresses her sympathy for the children: "well the poor [children – M.Z.-B.] are moving and wriggling" due to the fact that their natural needs are hindered by the frequent situation of static work with a book or writing in notebooks; however, she does not see the possibility to undertake activities of a different nature apart from some movement exercises outside the desks: "Well I then interrupt the lesson to get them moving, because, well, what else can I do? And then we go back, because what else can we do?"

The interviewees share the view that pupils need externally set boundaries and permanent control by teachers, i.e. "keeping an eye" on them so that they do not go beyond the framework created:

[...] clear rules that I set out right at the beginning, which make the students know exactly what I require and the limits they cannot cross [Polish teacher].

According to the interviewees, students also require the use of coercion – not only in the sphere of educational activities (mastering the indicated knowledge and skills) or behaviour, but also in the mental sphere. The interviewees declare that they try to "make students think" using lecturing methods.

In the perception of the interviewees, children also need constant incentives to work. It turns out that, for this purpose, the teachers usually reach for the marks that pupils get from frequent short tests and oral answers (also next to the blackboard), etc.:

[...] after the attendance check there is silence; they know that I will ask someone to come and stand by the blackboard, and to summarise the last three lessons for me [...]; tests after each unit; short tests [...]; I want them to study systematically [Polish teacher].

In the primary school grades 1 to 3, in addition to the teacher's marks (despite the obligatory descriptive assessment, these usually appear in another form – e.g. a symbol, a sign), there are often various kinds of rewards or punishments for children.

The teachers' statements show that, in many cases, external stimulation (such as: you have to; you should, because otherwise you will get a bad mark, etc.) does not result in an increase in the children's willingness to learn (actually to do what the teacher tells them to do):

[...] the boy has such a very light-hearted approach to...; really, he never did his homework; he would get a negative remark or a minus, and that failed to motivate him [primary school class teacher in grades 1–3].

A common theme in the narratives is disillusionment with the students who are increasingly difficult to motivate to take up the forms of activity offered to them in lessons. However, despite the verbalised low effectiveness of their external stimulation, the teachers' narratives rarely document a reflection on the specific features of the activities undertaken by them and the stimulation tools used. The interviewees, focused on the achievement of externally set goals and in a situation where they are often not satisfied with the involvement of children and parents in their achievement, see no alternative to the use of external stimulation based on coercion. Only few of them (4) reflect on the need for other types of interventions: three of them consider the need to take children's personal interests into account in their education and to try to make the content of lessons interesting for the children. One of them also considers the need to reduce the teacher's arbitrariness and shorten the distance between the teacher and the pupil. Another narrator sees the need to build the pupil's self-confidence and provide opportunities for success related to the performance of tasks set by the teacher.

In their narratives, the respondents revealed practices related to the fulfillment of the need to "lead the student by the hand" or even to support him/her in various educational activities (e.g. in the preparation of performances in which the children are merely performers of the teacher's creations and implementers of the teacher's vision, or in making school newspapers, etc.). In my interpretation, this is related to a lack of faith in the child's abilities; a belief that the child is not able to meet certain challenges on his or her own at a satisfactory level:

Every idea and its implementation is our involvement and possibly that of the parents, and the children are not involved. [...] Whether a performance or other things – the children don't prepare a plan, they don't search for anything; everything is done by me [a teacher of grades 1–3 in a primary school].

The descriptions of various task situations arranged by the interviewees show that the students are constantly and strictly instructed by the teachers without the possibility to make mistakes; to do something themselves from start to finish, and to take responsibility for it or to gain a sense of agency and pride. It is also evident here that the focus is on achieving a goal that is appropriate in the eyes of the female teacher interviewees, i. e. some desired and intended outcome by them (rather than the student), without placing any importance on the process of acquiring knowledge or skills itself.

Conclusions and Interpretations

The deficit in pupils' subjectivity revealed in the interviews⁶ can be linked to the restriction of their educational freedom and their ability to make choices. Sitting at a desk, constrained by top-down norms and rules, listening to the teacher or obliged to work with a textbook and top-down defined content, the children lose the chance to develop based on their own experiences,⁷ which Korczak describes in the words: "You explore. You try. You practice, youngest citizen. You want to know, to pluck from the chaos" (Korczak, 1958b, p. 362). This deficit is also revealed in perceiving pupils and speaking of them as if they were the objects of the teacher's interactions.

According to the cult of standardisation, the studied teachers, focused on the achievement of top-down and rigidly defined goals, exert a coercive influence also on such activity of students. Operating with the "language of necessity" (Bauman, 1995), maintaining a hierarchical (Bińczycka, 2009) teacher-student system, perceiving children as objects to be moulded and aiming at developing in them the ability to mechanically use assimilated knowledge, they remain far from the democratic and developmental vision of school interactions. They thus separate themselves from Korczak's system of democratic interactions which grants the child the right to play an active and creative role in his/her life. They are also attached to transmission teaching and stand in opposition to constructivist demands to break with it and base learning on active construction of knowledge together with others (adults and children) and on making meaning of the surrounding world. They move away from assumptions according to which the child ceases to be a passive recipient of transmitted knowledge (an empty vessel to be filled with knowledge) and becomes its active co-creator, which Korczak managed to fulfill by breaking away from schematic and automatic

6 The curtailment of the child's right to express his/her own opinion and thus his/her subjectivity in preschool institutions is reported, among others, by Anna Babicka-Wirkus and Maria Groenwald (2018).

7 Shortcomings in organising children's experiential education were discovered by Waloszek who found, among other things, that children's educational research activity is rationed, limited to demonstrations (2015).

absorption of information and developing the indicated skills at the school desk, as well as by bringing children's cognitive activity closer to reality by organising activities also outside the school (e.g. in concert halls, reading rooms, galleries, etc.). There, children could acquire knowledge by interacting with the surrounding world; they could develop a variety of skills, abilities and interests, and discover and fulfill their potential.⁸ Convinced of the need to externally set strict boundaries for pupils and to constantly monitor their adherence to rules, the teachers persist with traditional authoritarianism,⁹ which Korczak shunned because he considered it harmful to child development. He expressed his position in the words:

Here is the downward slope of the educator: he disregards, distrusts, suspects, investigates, catches, chastises, accuses and punishes, looks for convenient ways to prevent; he forbids more and more frequently and he forces more and more ruthlessly; he does not see the child's effort to write a piece of paper or an hour of life; he states dryly that it is incorrect (Korczak, 1984, p. 70).

The interviewees' attachment to lecturing methods and, as it were, their belief (despite their perceived lack of satisfactory effectiveness) that they are able to make pupils think when using them, should also be seen as a sign of authoritarianism. The interviewees do not perceive the toxicity of their interactions not only for the pupils' mental but also for their physical development. This is evidenced, for example, by the respondents' attachment to making the children sit at the desks in order to statically follow the teacher's instructions, and thus ignoring the hunger for movement of growing individuals. Meanwhile, as an expert in the nature of the child, Korczak wrote: "If not all, then the vast majority of children like movement and uproar; their physical and moral health depends on freedom of movement and screaming" (Korczak, 2013, p. 40). By fulfilling the need to externally stimulate pupils through the operation of rewards and punishments and by creating situations designed to induce them to systematically master the indicated information and desired skills in the form of, for example, asking questions next to the blackboard, the female teachers generate negative emotional states in children.

The need, uncovered by the female teachers, to instruct the pupils, or even to do things for them in various activities, is indicative of a lack of trust in the children. This is also supported by the revealed need to constantly control them, to watch over them so that they do not act or behave inappropriately. Korczak viewed such tendencies

8 It seems right that this kind of practice is worthy of being intensified by teachers on a daily basis at school.

9 Thus, Maria Szczepska-Pustkowska's conviction is confirmed that, despite frequent declarations about the partnership status of children, situations still occur in which "behind the facade of partnership and equality, authoritarian and prejudicial attempts to rule" (2011, p. 83) over children are hidden.

of adults towards children negatively and characterised them as follows: “One must watch to make the child listen, one must watch to make them perform” (Korczak, 1993, p. 436). The interviewees avoid the necessity (specified by Waloszek) to create opportunities for children to experience freedom and to develop responsibility through which teachers may support children “in taking up challenges, in rejecting unjustified peer pressure, coercion, patterns” (2009, p. 213).

In conclusion, it can be said that the revealed perception of children’s needs and actions based on them stands in opposition to Korczak’s pedagogy of creating opportunities for them to gain their own experiences through trial and error, supported by respect and trust in the child. Korczak appealed for this with the words: “Let children err and joyfully pursue the truth” (1958a, p. 253). This pedagogue was convinced that this makes it possible for the child to discover and activate his or her own developmental forces, to act creatively and to build a sense of agency and perseverance in overcoming difficulties and his/her own shortcomings. In this way, he or she develops a positive self-image and the ability to cope with the realities of life (Liebel, 2017).

In the context of the above findings, it should be noted that the narratives analysed and interpreted in this study do not allow for the assertion (considered appropriate by Barbara Smolińska-Theiss¹⁰ (2010)) that teacher practices follow the scientific findings cited therein. This is because it appears that they continue to challenge¹¹ the teacher’s perception of the child and his/her needs, as well as the actions taken to educate him/her. It seems right, therefore, to popularise them and to recommend that the pupil should be given the opportunity to become the creator of his or her own educational biography (Quortrup, 1993), i.e. a person who has the right to determine his or her own educational destiny in the broadest sense.

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10 According to B. Smolińska-Theiss (2010), any social practice should follow scientific findings.

11 The findings presented in the article correspond with the statement by Ewa Jarosz who argues that, just as during Korczak’s life and pedagogical activity, a lack of recognition of the child as an equal educational subject is also noticeable today. Indeed, in the minds of many teachers and other adults, the “ideology of upbringing based on authoritarianism” is still present (Jarosz, 2013, p. 56).

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