



Anna Józefowicz

<https://orcid.org/0000-0001-9126-3874>

e-mail: a.jozefowicz@uwb.edu.pl

University of Białystok

Children's Rights, Human Rights in the Latest Literature for Children: Choice and Recommendations for Education

Prawa dziecka, prawa człowieka w najnowszej literaturze dla dzieci. Wybór i wskazania dla edukacji

KEYWORDS

childhood, children's literature of 21st century, children's rights, Convention on the Rights of the Child, Universal Declaration of Human Rights, Janusz Korczak

ABSTRACT

The article offers the analysis of selected books addressed to children that feature the theme of children's rights in reference to the Convention on the Rights of the Child as well as human rights in relation to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Reaching for the content analysis method used in qualitative research methodology, I analyze and interpret the content of the latest books (second decade of the 21st century), both by Polish and foreign-language writers. I attempt to answer the questions: whether and how the analyzed books can help children understand and consciously exercise their rights? what human rights are emphasized in the selected books?; to what extent are the analyzed books open to discussion with the reader? The text is composed of two parts. In the first one, I present the existing state of knowledge in the social sciences and humanities about the absence of the category of childhood throughout history and the process of forming the child's subjectivity, giving rise to the recording of children's rights. In the second part of the text, I present conclusions from the content analysis of selected books addressed to children. I point to books in which the child is treated subjectively – as a citizen

“here and now.” I also indicate literature that can help educators, parents and people who care about protecting the child’s individuality in planning care and educational work.

SŁOWA KLUCZE ABSTRAKT

dzieciństwo,
literatura dziecięca
XXI wieku, prawa
dziecka, Konwencja
o prawach dziecka,
Powszechna
deklaracja praw
człowieka, Janusz
Korczak

Przedmiotem tekstu czynię wybrane książki adresowane do dzieci w młodszym wieku szkolnym, w których obecna jest tematyka praw dziecka w odwołaniu do Konwencji o prawach dziecka, jak również praw człowieka w odniesieniu do Powszechnej deklaracji praw człowieka. Korzystając z metody analizy treści stosowanej w metodologii badań jakościowych, dokonuję analizy i interpretacji treści książek najnowszych (II dekady XXI wieku) zarówno pisarzy polskich, jak i obcojęzycznych. Podejmuję się próby odpowiedzi na pytania: Czy i w jaki sposób książki poddane analizie mogą służyć dziecku w rozumieniu i świadomym korzystaniu ze swoich praw? Na jakie prawa człowieka jest w wybranych książkach położony akcent? Na ile analizowane książki są otwarte na dyskusje z czytelnikiem? Tekst jest złożony z dwóch części. W pierwszej prezentuję istniejący stan wiedzy w naukach społecznych i humanistycznych na temat braku kategorii dzieciństwa na przestrzeni dziejów oraz opisuję, jak toczył się proces formowania podmiotowości dziecka, dając początek zapisywaniu jego praw. W drugiej części tekstu prezentuję wnioski z analiz treści wybranych książek adresowanych do dzieci. Wskazuję na takie, w których dziecko traktowane jest podmiotowo – jako obywatel „tu i teraz”; literaturę, która może służyć pomocą w planowaniu pracy opiekuńczo-wychowawczej pedagogom, rodzicom, osobom, które troszczą się o ochronę jednostkowości dziecka.

Introduction

In Polish literature, the topic of children’s rights is associated with Janusz Korczak, an educator and doctor who fought for the dignity of the child as a human individual. The Old Doctor’s accomplishments in children’s literature were first presented in 2012, proclaimed the year of this distinguished caretaker and educator.¹ It is difficult to envisage what the recognition of children’s rights would have been like if it had not been for Janusz Korczak’s resolve to promote them with all his social, guardianship, educational and literary activities. Today he is also dubbed the first informal ombudsman for children’s rights. To this day, Korczak symposia are held periodically around the world, where the continuators of his pedagogical thought seek solutions to difficult issues concerning the current status of the child.

1 These included books by Beata Ostrowicka (*Jest taka historia: Opowieść o Januszu Korczaku*, 2012), Iwona Chmielewska (*Pamiętnik Blumki*, 2011), and Katarzyna Zimmerer (*Zwyczajny dzień*, 2012).

The publications that I have selected for the analysis from the abundance of children's books present on the Polish and world market are proof that the subjectivity of the child is being acknowledged, that the topic of children's rights is also becoming relevant in books addressed to the children's audience.

The purpose of this essay is to consider the ways in which children's and human rights are written about in recent children's literature, and thus to examine how this literature can become an educational tool that contributes to school curricula or home education. In making my selection of books, I also found it interesting to look at how far their contents refer to the canon of ethical principles and international standards of conduct towards children. I attempt to answer the questions: Can and how can the books analyzed benefit the child in understanding and consciously exercising his or her rights? What human rights are given emphasis in the selected books? To what extent are the analyzed books open to discussion with the reader?

The ongoing war in Ukraine since February 24, 2022, caused by the Russian military invasion, raises other multiple questions about the condition of humanity, in particular: how to raise young people to be attentive, sensitive, responsive to desensitization, opposed to passivity when faced with acts of human rights violations? The issue of the relevance of children's rights, human rights present in children's literature is socially important as there are different images of modern childhood: one taken away by war, disease, and various kinds of family dysfunction. It is worth exploring literature that is committed, anthropologically sensitive to the human condition, and conducive to addressing difficult topics with children in home and school literary education.

Changing discourses on childhood – from exclusion to multicontextuality

Amid discourses on multiple issues of social inequality of different groups, including their exclusion from social participation, the social group of children, given their age, has been covered throughout the centuries by equal civil rights and regulated standards of protection. Ewa Jarosz, in asking “why are we resistant to children's equality?,” hinted at the importance of attitudes toward the child even in the not so distant past. “The burden of the past,” that is, disgraceful, exclusionary practices of perceiving and treating the child, which are worth analyzing, make our relations with the child still difficult today (Jarosz, 2013, p. 95).

“Discovering childhood” – the process of recognizing it as a separate period, one of the phases in human life, took centuries. In his work *History of Childhood* (1995), Philippe Ariès argued that childhood is a product of culture, and is socially and

historically constructed. As a separate phase in human life, it was “discovered” (as the historian puts it), only in the 18th century, during the Enlightenment: it was then treated as a stage in human development in learning roles to prepare for adulthood.

Throughout history, attitudes toward children have been marked by great ambivalence: from fear of children to fear for children, from viewing the child as inherently evil to good, and innocent.

Conceptions of childhood showed an astonishing duality: Apollonian and Dionysian childhood, subjectified and objectified childhood, childhood of discipline/punishment and love/affection (Jenks, 2008, p. 111). Lloyd deMause called the period of the Middle Ages a nightmare, a period of ill attitude toward children, as well as hunger, disease, squalor and wandering life (deMause, 1974), and Barbara Smolińska-Theiss described childhood (until the 20th century) as a period of “apprenticeship for adulthood” (Smolińska-Theiss, 2010, p. 17). The situation of the child underwent changes in accordance with its cultural image in particular eras. The child was seen as a little adult, a cheap labor force, a star (unfortunately, often a lonely one), a hope for a better world, a victim of war, and only in modern times has the child become an active actor in social life.

The 20th century, which was supposed to be, according to Ellen Key, the age of the child, despite the growing body of children’s rights, improvements in their health due to medical advances, proved to be an age of grave offenses against children. Danuta Waloszek highlighted numerous situations of abuse by adults against minors “mass infanticide, exploitation of children, abuse, continuous experimentation with their psyche, feelings, and education, loneliness, exclusion, forcing children to undertake hard labor ..., malnutrition ..., confusion, threats to safety and identity” (Waloszek, 2003, p. 892). Nevertheless, the worldwide movement for children’s rights began to develop at the beginning of the 20th century. In Poland, it was Janusz Korczak who dispelled the myth of the child as a miniature adult and laid the foundations of modern pedagogy, which recognizes the child as a full-fledged being who deserves the same respect as an adult. Virtually since the mid-20th century, childhood has become a major cultural theme, a cultural and culture-creating category.

Children’s rights were first included in the Geneva Declaration in 1924, while the Convention on the Rights of the Child, adopted by the United Nations General Assembly in 1989, crowned the discussion on the protection of children and their situation in the context of democratization processes. It became the most widely ratified human rights treaty, a universal international agreement on fundamental human freedoms. Poland ratified this key document on children’s rights in 1991. It consists of a preamble, 54 articles and 3 additional (optional) protocols attached in subsequent years (2000, 2002 and 2011). The preamble of the Convention places special emphasis on the role of the family. The child’s right to a family is mentioned in

Articles 5, 9 and 18. Other rights of the child under the Convention include the right to freedom of association and freedom of peaceful assembly (Article 15), as well as the child's right to life and health (Article 6, for example). One of the most difficult and yet most important guidelines set by the Convention is the injunction to consider the best interests of the child (Article 3).²

Even though the Convention imposes an obligation on the countries that have ratified it to familiarize adults and children alike with it, social science research continues to point to large discrepancies between the ideas of humanists – that favor the child – and the practice of everyday life – that discriminates against the child. On the one hand, there is a noticeable presence of the child in almost every area of social life, and on the other hand, the child is rarely a full participant in it. Globalization and modernization, processes that have profoundly altered the landscape of the modern world, have also contributed to changes in children's experience of their childhood in schizophrenically dangerous forms. Neil Postman in the early 1990s put forward an alarming theory about the disappearance of childhood, which is associated with the perilous interpenetration of childhood and adulthood, the switching of roles between children and adults (Postman, 1994). The civilization shift, which has caused children to grow up earlier and faster, inspires neither peace nor enthusiasm. Marek Krajewski said that “modern children will see (experience) incomparably many more images before they mature than most adults do in a lifetime” (Krajewski, 2003, p. 110). The commercialization that is evident in every area of life, mass consumption, and disturbing educational patterns emanating from media broadcasts are affecting the quality of culture in almost every facet of life. Moreover, the skyrocketing pace of our civilization is leading to a collision between high-tech fueled culture and the biological nature of human beings. Sue Palmer, in a book with the telling title *Toxic Childhood*, notes the rising number of children who have emotional disorders (she mentions sullen, dissatisfied, depressed, and dysfunctional children) (Palmer, 2007, p. 8). Tomasz Szlendak, in turn, writes about the perfidy of marketing targeted at children, an ongoing war of media concerns for the attention of the child customer (Szlendak, 2005, p. 25). Maja Brywczyńska remarks on numerous instances of manipulation of childhood, with examples of families in which children are put in the

2 Other international treaties, such as the Charter of Fundamental Rights, the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, also address the rights of the child. The scope of this publication does not allow for a broader discussion of these, or a more extensive reference to the content of the articles of the Convention. I consider the publication *Convention on the Rights of the Child: Selection of Issues (Articles and Commentaries)*, compiled by the Office of the Ombudsman for Children (Stadniczeńko, 2015), as a valuable source of interpretation of the rights enshrined in the Convention's pages. Marek Michalak writes in the foreword: “The more effectively the provisions of the Convention on the Rights of the Child are observed, the less harm will be done to people. The Convention emphasizes that a child is a human being not only on paper” (2015, p. 9)..

way of careers, and children who no longer play, but are “entertained” as early as in kindergarten (Brzozowska-Brywczyńska, 2020, p. 16). Thus, on the one hand, we can see the child who is a consumer, an expert, using his or her parents’ money for his or her own pleasure, and on the other hand, the extreme case of the child of the street. The issue of street children is a particularly painful aspect of the discourse of exclusion (Marshall, 2011).

The history of shifting perceptions of childhood – from excluded to multicontextual, from the social exclusion of children in past centuries to the “over-representation” of childhood in contemporary reality, “hyper-childhood” interspersed with images of exclusion and discrimination – only outlined in this text, shows that the crisis has in fact always accompanied it.

The fact that almost two hundred countries have signed the Convention on the Rights of the Child, adopted 35 years ago, does not mean that these rights are respected in everyday life. Ewa Jarosz has been studying the issue of children’s social participation for years, and continues to identify many signs of exclusion and discrimination against the youngest, as well as highlight the discrepancy between the idea of children’s rights and their daily lives, where these rights are violated. The discourse of children’s social participation should be based on cooperation with children in order to undertake joint initiatives in various spheres, e.g. education, health, and politics (Jarosz, 2019). These days, social constructivism calls for learning about the reality of the child together with the child, and for research with children, not on children.

The Convention on the Rights of the Child consists of a set of obligations and international norms designed to provide care and protection for the child from various forms of neglect. The language of the Convention’s articles is far too difficult for a child audience, and hence the literature written for children that has been emerging in recent years addresses the topic of their rights in an accessible form, while using evocative illustrations.

Methods of representing children’s rights in selected children’s literature books

The decision of which books to choose for my analyses proved not to be easy. I was interested in the latest titles, published after 2000 and addressed to younger school-age children. Another important criterion I considered was their editorial quality and the message concerning “the dignity and equal and inalienable rights of all members of the human family,” according to a section of the convention’s preamble. I searched for books on the Polish website of the IBBY Association of the Polish Section of Friends of Children’s Books and the Polish website of the ABC All Poland Reads to

Children Foundation. These two organizations select and promote top-quality literature. I also read book reviews featured in specialized magazines dealing with children's literature, such as *Guliwer* and *Ryms*, for example, and followed numerous forums and blogs devoted to children's book reading, as well as the websites of Polish publishing houses (including Wydawnictwo Literatura and GWP).

I noticed in how many publications the visual design plays an important role, how many books are artistically sophisticated, and how difficult it is to indicate which literary genre some of them fall under. I found publications with hybrid genre forms, such as how-to books mixed with comic book elements, picture books, and realistic stories with characters from well-known fairy tales as protagonists. This diversity of both form and content made it very difficult for me to find a key that would help me classify the selected books, and I wanted to organize them according to their distinctive characteristics. I also kept in mind that when situating my study in the qualitative trend, which is a desirable strategy for the study of cultural texts, I could not lock the collected material into a rigid framework of classification. Analyzing the selected books, I looked for unique properties that were specific to the text. In the end, having decided on thematic categories organizing the collected publications, I decided that I was interested first of all in the rights that were emphasized in the books, those that are mentioned most often, and secondly in the visual style that the authors use to reinforce the message. Another reason why I distinguished these categories was to organize the books in such a chronological and thematic order in which they could be used in formal and informal education, as part of social education, constituting the content of an educational project, for example.

I present my breakdown of the ways in which children's rights are depicted in selected children's literature books. I have distinguished four categories. The first includes books dealing with children's rights in a general way (see subsection 1, "About children's rights in general"). Reading them could serve as an initiation, an introduction of the youngest children to the issues of dissemination of children's rights and methods of their protection. These books familiarize children with the Convention most importantly as a document that protects the welfare of children, and make them aware of the value of childhood, and thus humanity. I point to Pernilla Stafelt's publication, *All Children's Rights* (2011) as the first book available on the Polish publishing market that addresses the issue of children's rights and is intended specifically for children. Another such publication is *Masz prawa, człowieku* [You Have Rights, Man] (Węgrzecka and Zabielska-Stadnik, 2014). Both books rely on both text and images to highlight basic human freedoms. The illustrations are just as important as the text in these works, and it is the illustrations that make the selected articles of the Convention more comprehensible. The next publications: Joanna Olech's *Mam Mam prawo i nie zawaham się użyć go!* [I have a right and I won't hesitate to use it!] (2014)

and Anna Czerwińska-Rydel and Renata Piątkowska's *Moje prawa, ważna sprawa!* [My rights are a big deal!] (2014) also explain the various articles of the Convention and, interestingly, do so by drawing on fairy-tale props and characters.

By presenting the books in this order, I wanted to move from a general overview of the subject of the rights of the youngest citizens, to the genesis of the convention, to the demonstration of specific rights.

Hence, I selected the second category (2 "Adapting the classics..."), and undertook an analysis of Iwona Chmielewska's book, *Jak ciężko być królem* [How Hard It Is to Be a King] (2018). It is a picturebook that, in an intellectually challenging way, "pays tribute" to the great pedagogue J. Korczak and his timeless work, *Król Maciuś Pierwszy* [King Matt the First]. The thought of child subjectivity formulated more than 100 years ago by Dr. Korczak provided the groundwork for the convention.

The last two categories (3 "The right to protection from discrimination" and 4 "The right to freedom of education") refer to specific rights of the child as presented in selected publications.

1. About children's rights in general

The first book for children published in Poland and addressing the issue of children's rights was one by Swedish writer and illustrator Pernilla Stalfelt entitled: *All Children's Rights* (2011). The book paraphrases selected points of the Convention on the Rights of the Child, which are conveyed through colorful illustrations. The author singles out, among others, the right to have a name, parents (Articles 7, 8, 9), to information (Article 17), education (Article 28), freedom of expression (Articles 13, 14), rest and leisure (Article 31). She expounds them in simple sentences: narrator's comments on illustrations, such as: "children must not be kidnapped" or a child's exclamations (in speech bubbles), "don't kill me, I have the right to live"; "I want my daddy!", "I don't want to wear a scarf."

The convention itself is included at the end of the book, but in an abbreviated form and adapted to a children's audience. The introduction was written by Magdalena Środa, who explains to children what it means to have rights: "to be able to realize one's dreams; ... to be able to go to school, to have friends, to have time for fun and leisure." Moreover, the publication can hardly be described as strictly literary; it is more of a guidebook, a kind of a scrapbook for the child and parent/educator to browse and comment on together. Most of the illustrated scenes may arouse controversy. Their grotesque and cartoonish style combines the tragedy of the situation with humorous depiction, reminiscent of children's drawings and comments: we can see illustrations of drunken parents, and hungry, neglected children, for example. Without a doubt, the

fact is that the book does not misrepresent reality, but shows the context of children's rights as an inalienable matter, as the title itself indicates, thus provoking a discussion about the dark sides of reality, which prevents the child from having a dignified existence.

Since the book appeared on the Polish publishing market, the topic of children's rights has received increasing attention in literature for young audiences. Two picture-books, which I will analyze below, tackle the rights of the child-human through the medium of images. The first is the publication *Masz prawa, człowieku* [You Have Rights, Man] (Węgrzecka and Zabielska-Stadnik, 2014), and the next is Iwona Chmielewska's *Jak ciężko być królem* [How Hard It Is to Be a King] (2018). The format of a picture book, an art book that is ambiguous in the sense of being open to interpretation, emphasizing images as equally important as text, seems to be an intriguing choice for the modern child, who is immersed in image culture (Cackowska, 2017, p. 24).

The picture book *Masz prawa, człowieku* [You Have Rights, Man] was published under the honorary patronage of the Ombudsman. It is from this publication that one should start a conversation with children about human rights enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights adopted by the UN General Assembly in 1948. Notably, the International Covenants on Human Rights were enacted on the basis of the Declaration in 1966. The publication features a selection of 13 rights that apply even to the youngest citizens. This was done by means of illustrations: artistic collages (some of them resemble posters made with markers, paint or the linocut technique), by well-known Polish visual artists (including Joanna Rusinek and Jan Bajtlik). Each image aptly conveys the essence of the right it depicts. The introduction reads: "Because you are a person, you have your rights – the same as other people. ... if everyone respects human rights, they choose good. If they do not respect these rights, someone suffers, someone gets hurt, or someone loses their life." One cannot fail to notice that the quoted passage places emphasis on the importance of building a hierarchy of values in children from their earliest years, and the need to be responsible for their actions. The artists use symbolic images to help the child determine what rights each of us has, which does not always seem so obvious when it comes to breaking these rights. Artistic interpretations of selected rights, which may be abstract to a child (e.g., the concept of dignity and freedom), are a welcome educational tool in the combination of text and illustration. As an example, there is an artwork showing giant scissors cutting through a leash, which can symbolize (over)obedience, and enslavement. The advantage of this book as a teaching tool is that you can cover the short text – the provision of a particular law – and ponder the illustration. The child reader can define for themselves what they can see in the image, what title they would give it. These illustrations, images – each in a different style, unique, evocative in its simplicity (e.g., the right to rest), some humorous (the right to learn), some moving

(the right to have a homeland), intriguing (the right to one's own secrets) – seem to encourage the reader's own interpretations. On another note, they require the committed presence of an adult intermediary of reading to help the child look at them and to ensure that this look is not too superficial. Certainly, the book compels one to reach for the original Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which can also be preceded by a discussion of what other rights we have or what rights we would like to have so that we all have a better life.

In her collection of short stories *Mam prawo i nie zawaham się go użyć!* [I have a right and I won't hesitate to use it!] (2014), Joanna Olech makes co-authors well-known fairy tale characters for children (e.g. Pinocchio, Puss in Boots), who in unconventional ways plead for dignity, equal treatment, a sense of security, and participation in culture.

She puts the fairy tale character of Little Red Riding Hood on guard for, among other things, dignified living conditions (without violence, exploitation, with guaranteed medical care), free expression of one's views without offending others, the possibility of having secrets of one's own, as well as the right to learn and develop one's talents, equal treatment regardless of gender, skin color or mental or physical fitness. Although the individual stories refer to real situations that can happen to children today, the character from a fairy tale familiar to everyone is shown to be an expert on the articles of the Convention. In nine stories, Little Red Riding Hood boldly, albeit a bit theatrically, explains (while reaching for the scroll with the rights of the child that she carries with her) how a child should behave, what to say, and whom to ask for support when faced with dangerous or uncomfortable situations.

Krystyna Zabawa (2015) proposes that many fairy tales should be viewed in the context of children's rights and responsibilities. This is an interesting concept, especially since fairy tale poetics have always been full of objectionable or threatening scenes, thus fostering a discussion of harmful stereotypes that may lurk in folk tales. Many well-known fairy tales such as Hansel and Gretel, Cinderella, Thumbelina, Rapunzel, The Little Match Girl, The Ugly Duckling, etc. abound with scenes of violations of human rights, some of which involve children. It is worth proposing an interpretation of these fairy tales as showing the struggle for freedom, the right to voice one's opinion or the right to protect children from exploitation.

The collection of short stories by Anna Czerwińska-Rydel and Renata Piątkowska *My Rights Matter!* have a similar structure and form (2014) although it does not feature fairy tale characters, but children's characters. It depicts situations in which a particular right has been broken, which is followed by a reference to the Convention on the Rights of the Child and, in conclusion, a suggestion for how to solve the uncomfortable situation. One example that is very topical is a child taking a cell phone to a school camp, when the rules of the camp said that it was forbidden to use it. The

next story addresses the issue of checking someone else's correspondence without the knowledge of that person, and discusses whether (and/or when) parents are allowed to do so. Another story lays a strong emphasis on reacting, overcoming the indifference of witnesses, observers, on the offensive behavior of people who discriminate against individuals with disabilities (the example of a woman discriminating openly against a disabled child playing in a sandbox).³ Being aware of rights and being able to exercise them comes in handy for the characters everywhere, as it turns out: on a walk, in the sandbox, on vacation, in the library or on the train. Talking about children's rights means making children aware that there are people around them to whom they can turn for help, it means informing them that there are organizations whose job it is to help children when bad things happen to them (like UNICEF), as well as pointing out the number of the Children's Helpline operating at the Office of the Ombudsman for Children (800 12 12 12).

While recalling the institution of the Ombudsman for Children, it seems necessary to point to publications that were created on the initiative of Marek Michalak, long-time Ombudsman for Children (2008–2018), educator, and social activist.

Guided by Korczak's insistence that one must not leave behind the world as it is, the recipient of the Order of the Smile published a book *Opowieści o tym, co w życiu ważne* [Tales of what is important in life] (2023b) for children's readers. The children's point of view shown in the book (scenes from the lives of siblings) arising from children's narratives, and children's philosophizing is a nod to childhood sensitivity and inextinguishable curiosity about the world, which should be especially nurtured by adult caregivers. The universal values mentioned in the Convention on the Rights of the Child (including respect, freedom, dignity, peace, courage, and rest) come into view through everyday tangible events.

2. Adapting the classics – *Król Maciuś Pierwszy* [King Matt the First] by Janusz Korczak and *Jak ciężko być królem* [How Hard It Is to Be a King] by Iwona Chmielewska

Iwona Chmielewska's picture book *How Hard It Is to Be a King* is a semiotically complex work that eludes simple genre categorizations. The work can be seen as an adaptation of Korczak's original text *King Matt the First* – a precise selection from it, the "essence" of the story that is in tune with the visual message. With her work, Chmielewska reminds us about the uniqueness and timelessness of Korczak's book, which was written 100 years ago and laid the groundwork for international standards

³ Reference is made to Article 23 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child, which states that all children have the same right to play, learn or be treated well, even if they are sick or disabled.

in the protection of children's subjectivity. Korczak's work can be regarded as a starting point for deliberations taking place from the dawn of the 20th century to the present day on the place and role of the child in society. Moreover, the story about Matt is notable for its stress on the idea of self-governance, involvement in the welfare of society (peer group, school, and small local community), which makes it possible to interpret it as a lesson in civic education. With her book, the author paid a tribute to Korczak's work, and reminded us of the timeless questions it poses about responsibility for others while holding high office; about the essence of kingship – what is one a king for?

In both stories – the original and the adaptation – Matt tries to understand what power and democracy is, but he is alone in this and thus helpless.

The crown, which is clearly a symbol of power, is a burden in Chmielewska's work more than anything else: it becomes overwhelming and oppressive. The evocative illustrations in the picturebook complement the narrative. It can be a challenge to label them, when, for example, we see tiny Matt sitting on a giant chair-throne, while that throne stands on a crown. Matt's head is lowered, you can see that he is troubled, he does not look like a carefree child. "Matt is small ... how can he be a king" reads the caption. The color photo of Matt that recurs throughout Chmielewska's book is the one edited photograph of Janusz Korczak (Henryk Goldszmit) himself, published in the first edition of the book in 1923. Important in the biographical context of Korczak is the quote that accompanies this photograph: "when I was as little as I am in this photograph, I wanted to do all that is written here myself. And then I forgot, and now I'm old." In writing *How Hard It Is to Be a King*, the author seems to have fulfilled Korczak's dream, by making him the protagonist. The great educator and his hero King Matt are one person, equally concerned about the enormous responsibility that power should entail. The Old Doctor encapsulated his worries, dreams, everyday life and premonition of a tragic death in the story. In *King Matt the First*, the young king's efforts culminate in failure. Despite this, it is his thought process, his good intentions, his asking questions that become important. This makes him a hero and for this he can be remembered for the next 100 years.

The book about King Matt once again reminds us of Korczak's message that one must not leave behind the world as it is. Nevertheless, Chmielewska's story offers far more hope than the original. The artist ends the book with an imagined meeting between Matt and Janusz Korczak. In her fantasy, the author seats them together in the branches of the trees, allowing the young king to be a child again for a moment with the right to make mistakes, as a boy who receives support from a caring guardian. This ending opens up broad room for interpretation. In the context of children's rights, it becomes important to cite the numerous articles of the Convention on the need to provide children with care, protection, and assistance in difficult situations (including war and adoption).

3. The right to protection from discrimination

Some of the stories in the “Safe Child” series published by Gdańsk Psychological Publishing House refer to the standards enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the Convention on the Rights of the Child, and offer information that mainly seeks to help the young reader when dealing with violence and discrimination in the immediate surroundings (including school, and peer group). Article 1 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights begins with the words: “All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights. They are endowed with reason and conscience and should act towards one another in a spirit of brotherhood.” Similarly, the overarching principles of the Convention on the Rights of the Child are non-discrimination and the best interests of the child as the underlying factors of any action concerning children. In the “Safe Child” series, it is worth noting Catherine DePino’s short story *Blue Cheese Breath and Stinky Feet* (2007) and such publications by Elżbieta Zubrzycka as *Powiedz komuś* [Tell Someone] (2004) and *Śłup soli* [Pillar of Salt] (2007). Each of the stories has a discernible message emerging from the characters’ actions and dialogues, a message that overcoming desensitization, responding to injustice, and respecting and caring for others is something a child learns in the family home.

Magdalena Młodnicka’s *Nie daj się gnębić* [Don’t Let Them Bully You] (2010), published in the *Wielkie Problemy Małych Ludzi* [Big Problems of Little People] series, is also a therapeutic story, and the “big problem” referred to in the title is the increasing pain being caused to one person in the classroom by another: a school bully. Besides the moral story about school, the book offers practical tips on how to say no to discrimination. The emphasis is on seeking support from those around you and the need, even necessity, for those around you to react. In their research, Sylwia Jaskulska and Wiesław Poleszak demonstrate how much mutual acceptance of students in the classroom depends on the teacher (Jaskulska & Poleszak, 2015). Talking about values, agreeing and writing down common values can be a good start in building a school community, as well as an example of preventive action against exclusion of people who stand out from the group for various reasons.

Another book, Emma Strack and Maria Frade’s lexicon *Dyskryminacja. Powiedz: stop!* [Discrimination: Say Stop!] (2021) is, like the title suggests, a protest against discrimination in its broadest sense. The book is divided into five thematic sections depicting the most common types of discrimination based on origin, appearance, identity, group affiliation and health. Two points seem especially important in the story: there is no such thing as small-scale discrimination, as it always escalates, and how significant it is for adults to be mindful of the message of values, reflective about how they formulate messages, whether they create barriers, hurtful judgments and comparisons.

4. The right to freedom of education

The child's right to education⁴ was covered in a book which is part of another well-known and important Polish publishing series "Wojny Dorosłych – Historie Dzieci" [Wars of Adults – Stories of Children], namely Renata Piątkowska's book *Która to Malala* [Which one is Malala] (2015). The famous contemporary activist Malala Yousafzai, fighting for equal access to education for children, especially girls living in Muslim countries, the youngest winner of the Nobel Peace Prize, is portrayed in the book as a child whose single voice is beginning to have a powerful impact. Malala's voice, which consistently focused on respecting the human rights and children's rights to education, freedom of speech, and freedom of belief, was heard by the whole world, and Malala thus became a symbol of the fight against discrimination and fanaticism. Her efforts in support of other children consisted mainly of corresponding with them, giving them courage through words, and providing information. It is noteworthy that a picture book written by Malala herself, *Malala's magic pencil* (Yousafzai, 2018) was published in 2018. In the book, the author and the heroine of the story demonstrates the importance of the voice of children and the idea of their social involvement. She argues that the written word, as symbolized in the story by a simple pencil, can be a powerful weapon that, when used consistently, has the magical power to change the world.

As of September 2021, Julita Grodek's book *Mania – dziewczyna inne niż wszystkie* [Mania – A girl unlike any other] (2017) has entered the list of suggested readings for early childhood education. The book talks about the biography of Polish scientist Marie Skłodowska-Curie, along with a broad socio-historical and political context. The book not only contains facts about Maria's research on radioactivity, and trivia about the expansion of the automobile industry and fashion standards, but can also contribute to the discussion of women's difficult access to education in the first decades of the 20th century. Maria is portrayed as a courageous woman, who is determined to take up work, undeterred by gossip and convention. Julita Grodek portrays her as a paragon of a smart, enterprising, feisty woman, balancing numerous social roles.

For generations, the figure of Skłodowska became mythologized and eventually became a pop culture icon. In this school reading, Maria is almost impeccable in her fortitude, wisdom and creative ingenuity. It is worth noting the multifaceted nature of this book and to point out the importance of the young Nobel laureate's childhood as

4 In the Convention on the Rights of the Child, Articles 28-29 read: "States Parties recognize the right of the child to education, and with a view to achieving this right progressively and on the basis of equal opportunity, they shall, in particular: (a) Make primary education compulsory and available free to all; ... States Parties agree that the education of the child shall be directed to: (a) The development of the child's personality, talents and mental and physical abilities to their fullest potential;

the foundation constituting the habitus that determined her further choices. Mania's childhood and the careful observation of reality that she already undertook during this time can become a bridge connecting the heroine with the contemporary child reader. Her diligence, the consistency of her actions, the courage to be herself and, finally, the multidimensionality of the social role of women are all highlighted in an anecdotal way. Such reading material can provide a good basis for building the personality of the pupil with an emphasis on the importance and necessity of the right to lifelong learning. The biographies of prominent people of science or art, which expose the importance of their childhood – often historically distant, but nevertheless having many commonalities (curiosity about the world, the need for joyful play or a safe home) – are becoming a popular theme in the latest Polish literature for children. It is a constant task of teacher-educators to commemorate and teach about the figures who had an impact on changing the fate of history, and propelled the world of science and humanistic thought, without forgetting, above all, to nurture the humanity in people.

Conclusion

The worldwide movement for children's rights began to take shape at the dawn of the 20th century. In Poland, Janusz Korczak was the undisputed forerunner and defender of children's rights: he was one of the first in his time to recognize the child as a full-fledged being, with the subjectivity, dignity, and respect due to him or her. Today, conscious citizens of democratic countries are not surprised to see human rights and children's rights observed, which does not mean that almost daily violations do not occur.

It should be constantly reiterated that the rights of the child are human rights, when dealing with the rights of the child, we are dealing with human rights. It should also be noted that the child, as a mentally and physically developing subject, deserves special care and protection (including legal protection) to support him or her in growing up. Furthermore, reasoning more broadly, the Convention on the Rights of the Child is an instrument that, while protecting the rights of the child, marks the importance of the unique time of childhood in the entire human life cycle, childhood being the basis for becoming a conscious citizen and, above all, a human being who is worthy of the name.

The purpose of the books selected for analysis was to make the subject of children's rights more comprehensible to today's young audience. They tell of contemporary events taking place in spaces familiar to children, their protagonists are children, and the selected article of the Convention on the Rights of the Child uses tangible examples from their daily lives.

Among the works under analysis, we can note those that were created intentionally with a view to highlighting the rights of the child in everyday life today, and whose subject is clearly discernible in the title (such as *Mam prawo i nie zawaham się go użyć* [I have a right and I won't hesitate to use it] or *Moje prawa ważne sprawa!* [My rights are a big deal!]). In other publications, the topic of children's rights is no less important, even though it is not the main subject of the book and is not evident in the title (e.g. *Jak ciężko być królem* [How hard is it to be a king]; *Mania, dziewczyna inna niż wszystkie* [Mania, a girl unlike any other], *Która to Malala?* [Which one is Malala?]).

In addition to the analyzed books that have been selected intentionally for its special educational potential as teaching material, there are many books on the Polish market where the issue of children's rights is discussed incidentally. It appears in the context of difficult, taboo topics (illness, domestic violence, refugees, and war).⁵

At the same time, it is worth noting that there are many lesson plans relating to the child and his or her rights, in which the authors share their methodological solutions in the field of early childhood education.⁶ None, however, uses the recent literature indicated in this essay. Several lesson plans repeat exercises around Tadeusz Kubiak's poem *W kraju Baj-Baju* In the Fairyland or Marcin Brykczynski's *O prawach dziecka* [On the Rights of the Child]. Therefore, it might be a good idea for further research to analyze the existing lesson plans posted on numerous websites in terms of their use of prose or poetic works, or to try to answer the question of how and what kind of fiction and popular literature is used to construct lesson plans addressing the issue of children's rights, as well as their duties.⁷

I am convinced that it is necessary to become familiar with the books proposed in this essay to foster better communication with children with regard to both their rights and duties. I believe that it would be a good idea to develop the teaching

5 To name a few: A. Grabowski, *Biuro dzieci znalezionych* (2022), G. Kuijer, *Książka wszystkich rzeczy* (2016), P. Lindenbaum, *Pudle i frytki* (2017), A. Suchowierska, *Mat i świat* (2015).

6 Ready-made lesson plans are available, among other on such sites as: <https://brpd.gov.pl/scenariusze-zajec/>; <http://www.edukacja.edux.pl/p-10738-jestesmy-dziecmi-mamy--swoje-prawa-scenariusz.php>; https://sp58katowice.pl/phocadownload/prawa_dziecka/scenariusz-pd.pdf; <https://przedszkolankowo.pl/2019/01/13/maly-czlowiek-duza-sprawa-maly-czlowiek-ma-swe-prawa-scenariusz-zajec/>. Lesson plans are also provided in the publication: Falkowska et al, 2012.

7 The first Polish book strictly on children's rights was *Mam prawo!* by Grzegorz Kasdepke (2007). Many years have passed since its first edition (2007) and many more books have followed. As Krystyna Zabawa has made a very meticulous critical analysis of Kasdepke's book, let me just point out, agreeing with the researcher, that Kasdepke's book contains numerous generalities and undeveloped thoughts (Zabawa, 2015). In my opinion, the idea of discussing children's rights transferred to the stage of a school theater is artificial in many areas: dialogues, situations, humor. I am not sure who (the child? the educator?) the bizarre scene of kidnapping puppets referring to child abduction or the choppy dialogues are going to appeal to. As for Janusz Korczak, we learn only that he is the patron of the school where the plot of the book takes place.

methods for these books, with attention to both issues: rights and duties. In this context, I cannot agree with Kasdejk, who in his book *I Have the Right!* (deliberately not included in the above analyses) points out that the topic of the child's rights is completely separate from the issue of the child's duties. Although a child's rights cannot depend on the fulfillment of duties, since they arise from the very fact of birth and being a human being, the significance of duties seems important in family, as well as social life. The exercise of rights should not encounter any limits other than those that ensure the exercise of the same rights of other people. The well-known sayings, stemming from Immanuel Kant's moral imperative, that my freedom ends where the right to another's freedom begins, or that I can be myself as long as I don't offend another, remain relevant today. Thus, a proper understanding of one's rights becomes a lesson in respect for one's neighbor. Having the right to respect, we must remember that so does another person: parent, teacher, and friend. To know one's rights is to make demands of oneself first and foremost: having the right to make mistakes, we also have the obligation to correct them.

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