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The Child in Janusz Korczak's Pedagogical Anthropology: Some Reflections on Early Childhood Education

Dziecko w perspektywie antropologii pedagogicznej Janusza Korczaka. Kilka refleksji w kontekście wczesnej edukacji

KEYWORDS

child, childhood, pedagogical anthropology, early childhood education, Janusz Korczak

ABSTRACT

The following article organizes the problem of the search for the meanings of one of the fundamental concepts for contemporary pedagogy. The question of understanding the notion of "child" in contemporary pedagogical discourse steers the author's analysis towards the approach of pedagogical anthropology. The multiplicity of theoretical and methodological positions within modern research on childhood creates a peculiar area of study combining the achievements of many disciplines of science which explores knowledge about the child from multiple research perspectives. The analysis of who the child is becomes fundamental when we realize that pedagogical theories and systems, as well as specific methodological approaches and didactics of early childhood education are founded on this notion. This concept entails specific approaches to the child and childhood, and changes in its meanings are responsible for paradigmatic shifts in parenting and didactics. The author attempts to define and outline the category of the child against the background of human anthropology, in order to arrive at Korczak's concept of the child and childhood and to show its implications for early childhood education. The concept of the child as it appears in the works of Janusz Korczak opens up new interpretative and methodological spaces. In methodological terms, the article contributes to qualitative pedagogical research.

SŁOWA KLUCZE

dziecko, dzieciństwo, antropologia pedagogiczna, wczesna edukacja, Janusz Korczak

ABSTRAKT

Poniższy artykuł jest zaproszeniem do poszukiwania znaczeń jednego z podstawowych pojęć dla współczesnej pedagogiki. Pytanie o rozumienie pojęcia dziecka we współczesnym dyskursie pedagogicznym kieruje analizy autorki w stronę podejścia antropologii pedagogicznej. Wielość stanowisk teoretycznych i metodologicznych w ramach badań prowadzonych nad dzieciństwem tworzy współcześnie swoisty obszar studiów łączących dorobek wielu dyscyplin nauki. Wśród ich stanowisk poszukiwana jest wiedza o dziecku ujmowana z wielu perspektyw badawczych. Analiza tego, kim dziecko jest, staje się zasadnicza, kiedy uświadomimy sobie, że na tym pojęciu ufundowane są teorie i systemy pedagogiczne, a także konkretne podejścia metodologiczne i dydaktyka wczesnej edukacji. To pojęcie buduje konkretne podejścia do dziecka i dzieciństwa, a zmiany jego znaczeń odpowiadają za zmiany paradygmatyczne w wychowaniu i w dydaktyce. Autorka podejmuje próbę dookreślenia i zarysowania kategorii dziecka na tle antropologii człowieka, by w konsekwencji dojść do Korczakowskiej koncepcji dziecka i dzieciństwa i ukazać jej implikacje dla wczesnej edukacji. Koncepcja dziecka odczytana z dzieł Janusza Korczaka wytacza nowe przestrzenie interpretacyjne oraz metodyczne. W aspekcie metodologicznym artykuł ma charakter komunikatu z jakościowych badań pedagogicznych.

Introduction. In search of the meaning of the term "child"

The human being has always posed a fundamental definition problem and interpretive challenge for many scientific disciplines. The quest for knowledge about humans and the culmination of research findings in the natural, medical and historical sciences, paradoxically further problematizes the essence of humankind when analyzed in the humanities. Despite the constantly refined tools for cognition of the human being, depicting the nature of life processes, development, learning and experiencing various emotional states, people still remain "unknown beings," as the French Nobel Prize winner Alexis Carrel put it. Despite this state of knowledge, the question of who we are remains a fundamental and ever-present issue in philosophical anthropology. In fact, specific scientific theories and new laws are being developed on this ontological foundation.

Since definition of the human being poses so many difficulties and interpretive challenges to science, it is difficult not to further problematize this analysis and not to ask another question, which becomes particularly important and relevant for an educator in understanding educational, developmental and didactic processes.

The question of who the child is transfers the ontological question of humankind to the realm of education. It is an outlook where it is possible to seek an anthropological foundation for the understanding and meanings of the term "child." As Martinus J. Langeveld says, "a human being is first a child, but who the child is remains almost completely ignored by anthropology" (Ablewicz, 2003, p. 14). Intuitively, this seems obvious. After all, as educators, we know who the child is. However, our common preknowledge turns out to be insufficient to fully know and understand his or her essence.

Who is the child, what is his or her ontological constitution that underlies pedagogical concepts, child-rearing theories, educational instruments or legal institutions? Quoting Georg Hegel, we can say that "what is known is not yet something cognized, just because it has been known" (Hegel, 1963, p. 42). Often, it is only an emerging pedagogical challenge, a particular legal mechanism or a pedagogical measure that prompts us to reflect on our understanding and learning of the idea of the child that underlies a given institution or theory. This theoretical framework calls for a suitable methodological approach to answer the question of who the child is in the context of the pedagogical thought of Janusz Korczak and its implications for the reality of early childhood education. This question is the central concern of this study which uses the literature review method (Fink, 2019). The present article is an extended report of the research that the author conducted as part of her work on the child's right to education, while the texts and legal acts included in the analysis comply with the substantive criteria of the literature review. Therefore, the key objective of this article is to explore the concept of the child according to Janusz Korczak's pedagogical anthropology, and to identify its tangible implications for early education.

The child – a person of lack and expectations for being understood

In the search for the understanding of the concept of the child and areas of interpretation of the child's functioning in society, it is impossible not to refer to the problem at hand in an interdisciplinary manner. The child and childhood as a social, pedagogical and legal category (Kozak, 2013, p. 51) are being examined by many disciplines of science today. This issue organizes the research areas of, for example, such sciences as philosophy or perhaps even the philosophy of childhood which some researchers view as an independent research discipline (Matthews, 2006), history, sociology, psychology, legal sciences, literature and art as well as children's philosophy of life and anthropology of childhood (Szczepska-Pustkowska, 2011, p. 29). Contemporary childhood studies organize and explain this research space in an interdisciplinary way, according to the methodological viewpoint adopted based on the emerging research categories.

Here it is necessary to mention the pioneering research done by Jan Władysław Dawid at the end of the 19th century (Dawid, 1887) and the first historical studies of the child and childhood conducted in the late 1960s and early 1970s by Philippe Ariès and Lloyd deMause.

Today, the literature on the subject comprises comprehensive studies of the problems of the child and childhood, which are centered around specific pedagogical categories. Thus, Bogusław Śliwerski's (2007) extremely valuable holistic and multidimensional approach in the spirit of child-centered pedagogy, which synthetizes the entire line of thought, contributes a new understanding of the child and childhood to contemporary humanistic pedagogy.

Another important category that organizes reflection on the child and childhood is the issue of protecting children from abuse and exploitation. This problem is addressed, for example, by Ewa Jarosz (2008, 2016, 2021). The aspect of sociological transformations and transitions in the approach to the analysis of the child and childhood is broached in Barbara Smolińska-Theiss's research (2010). When speaking of contemporary research on the child and childhood, it is also worth citing Wendy Stainton Rogers' concept of discourses of concern for the child. She combines research categories that are important for the problem under analysis, concerning the perception and understanding of children by analyzing the discourse of children's needs, children's rights and children's quality of life (Rogers, 2008, pp. 174–181). These discourses become further horizons of understanding the child. These different ways of understanding and perceiving children with regard to their needs, rights and social status imply different approaches of professionals to children and types of state social policy towards the care, education and upbringing of the child (Kehily, 2008, pp. 172 ff.), while delineating the vast and heterogeneous interpretative horizons of the category of "child." Rogers situates her theory in the constructivist paradigm, with the assumption that our understandings of and attitudes toward the child are "always the product of human meaning-making" (Rogers, 2008, p. 157).

William A. Corsaro, in his studies of childhood, says that any interpretation of the concept of the child hinges on the culture, organization and degree of development of a given society (Corsaro, 1997). The recognition of childhood as a social and pedagogical category is not fundamentally disputed in contemporary scientific debates (D. Gittins, M.J. Kehily, W. Rogers, W.A. Corsaro, G.W. Matthews, U. Makowska-Monista, B. Smolińska-Theiss and others).

Mary Jane Kehily organizes the multiplicity of definitions and methodologies in the study of the child and childhood in the context of three interpretive approaches: historical, sociocultural and political (Kehily, 2008). This is a comprehensive project that, by adopting the categories of time, development and group, makes it possible to frame the contemporary discourse on childhood in certain general terms. These three

approaches can serve as a reference point for contemporary research on the child and childhood, co-creating it dynamically, just as the understanding of the child is rapidly evolving in the context of historical time, the sociological development of society, and the development and inclusion of this category in normative-political analysis.

In light of these analyses, Korczak's question to each of us seems to be incredibly courageous and to require a straightforward answer:

> What is the child as a spiritual entity different from us?
> What are its characteristics, its needs, what unseen possibilities does it harbor? What is this half of humanity, living together and next to us in a tragic split? We impose on it the burden of the duties of tomorrow's man, without giving it any of the rights of today's man (Korczak, 1987, p. 12).

Korczak's redefinition of the child and childhood

These attempts to understand the concept of the child through the lens of historical, sociological, political-legal contexts and philosophical anthropology essentially represent two interpretive trends: oriented towards "lack" and "fullness."

The first approach and understanding of the child falls within the historical conditions of the development of society and the position of the child in the family and in the community.

Reaching back to the history of childhood, we can see how for many centuries the child has been understood and treated precisely from the point of view of what he or she lacks to become a full-fledged member of human society. These are approaches that fit into the discourse of the child's needs as defined by Rogers, which considers childhood as a period of becoming a person: a period in which a child's developmental needs should be met and protected. In these theories, the child is construed from the standpoint of his or her dependency on adults, defenselessness, helplessness, lack of autonomy, as well as being irrational and irresponsible (Kusztal, 2018, p. 64).What distinguishes the aforementioned concepts, which I call "orientations of lack" (Kozak, 2013), is the view of the child as an "incomplete" human being, who falls far short of full humanity.

Much work lies ahead of him or her when it comes to discovering and creating a proper human being in himself or herself. The child cannot be a child here and now, because he or she is always told to be someone else, better, more adult. Korczak used to say the following about such an approach: "our children are not allowed to live according to their own will and reason. They are constantly being prepared for the future life when they grow up. And meanwhile they are shackled, restricted in their rights. All this ostensibly in the interests of their education and protection" (Korczak, 2017, p. 273).

This lack, being defined and revealed in so many ways in relation to the child, becomes his or her essential feature (Śliwerski, 2007, p. 102), the primary marker of his or her identity. When construed as an incomplete human being, the child is excluded from the community in a number of ways: he or she is isolated from those who are entitled to full "being in the world" (Śliwerski, 2007, p. 22), heading for adulthood, dreaming of it and constantly looking forward to something: "All this and many other things make the child want to be older, to grow up, to break free, to throw off the shackles, to become independent, to be oneself. Children are waiting, dreaming about the end of a life of bondage, the dream freedom at last!" (Korczak, 2017, p. 274).

It is the "lack," the expectation of full existence that sets a child apart from an adult. Lack becomes the defining space of the child's existence: its prison and conviction. Paradoxically, however, this lack also sheds light on the proper context of being a child. As Jacyno and Szulżycka note:

> Lack extricates a given individual from the unclassifiable cluster of the end of the procession, because it establishes an identity and therefore a life-giving difference.
> Lack elevates the one it has affected to the status of being. What distinguishes a child's lack in today's repertoire of human lacks is the incomplete expression of possible future lacks. The child can be All and Each in the future, so now he or she is a Nobody. Identity constructed around lack brings it back to life, because it produces identity, but difference itself conceived as "lack" puts it to death (1999, p. 22).

Janusz Korczak uses this reflection on the child in his pedagogical anthropology, when he points to the child as a complete being: a being who lacks nothing, who does not need to become someone else, better, greater, in order to be called a human being. In Korczak's view, the child is seen through the prism of fullness: fullness of freedom, rights, self-creation, but also as a being who is capable of taking responsibility for the process of his or her maturation and education. It is Korczak's discovery of the fullness of humanity in the child that forces him to change the image of the child, to overturn the social construct of childhood. Korczak's acknowledgment and highlighting of the idea of the child's subjectivity consequently leads to the child's liberation, to the granting of full sovereignty and rights as well as responsibility for their fulfillment. With this view, we can look at the child as a competent human being, a co-partner, a co-citizen, a co-creator of culture, and a philosopher, as well as a person who is capable of communicating and learning from others. This is a completely new perspective of understanding the child, the perspective of the child as a teacher of an adult, an educator. Korczak says that:

The child provides me with experience, influences my beliefs, the universe of my feelings; I receive orders for myself from the child, I demand, accuse myself, indulge or absolve myself.

> The child instructs and educates. The child is a book of nature for the educator; by reading, he or she matures. The child must not be underestimated. He or she knows more about himself or herself than I know about him or her. He or she spends time with himself or herself at all waking hours. I only keep making guesses about him or her (2017, p. 101).

Korczak's outlook of an educator "making guesses about the child" is an extraordinary space for mutual learning, co-partnership, pursuit of the idea of respect and consideration for the rights of every human being. Korczak firmly stresses the uniqueness of every person, and lays the foundation for the pedagogical and legal principle of the child's subjectivity. He appeals to teachers and educators: one must learn to know and understand people (Korczak, 2017, p. 278). This is a very difficult call to contemplate the essence of the child-human in upbringing, care and education.

In Korczak's pedagogical anthropology, the child is a being through itself (*ens per se*). He or she is the person of the present day, who, thanks to him/herself, as far as his/her abilities and potential for development allow, is capable of autonomous development (Sliwerski, 1992, p. 39). Korczak's understanding of the child and the time in which his/her childhood takes place is a philosophy of the fullness of humanity, the fullness of freedom, rights, and self-creation. This understanding opens up the space for a social and normative change in the perception of the child, for recognizing his or her subjectivity, for perceiving him or her as a fellow citizen, partner, and creator of the world around him or her, who is capable, to the extent of his or her abilities, of taking responsibility for himself or herself.

Korczak's concept of defining the child through the angle of "fullness" becomes the basis of the modern category of children's rights and sets new horizons for early education didactics. For the entire system of child rights protection is founded on this understanding of the child. This notion of "making guesses about the child" is situated within the child rights discourse cited above after W.S. Rogers. They were given their final, normative anchoring in the Convention on the Rights of the Child, adopted by the United Nations General Assembly in November 1989. It was Janusz Korczak's pedagogical thought that had a significant influence on the Polish translation of the Convention (cf. Smolińska-Theiss, 2014, pp. 129–142).

Conclusion – implications for early childhood education

The search for an understanding of the concept of the child in the contemporary discourse of early childhood education leads us, through an analysis of Janusz Korczak's pedagogical anthropology, to a new view of the child. This is the child who already IS, who does not have to only become, who is not "the person of the present

day," but becomes a pedagogical challenge, a task and a space for mutual learning here and now for the educator and teacher. Therefore, the space of the child's development and childhood must be subjected to the laws of the very stage of life in which human childhood happens. The time and place of a child's early education is a space of child participation, protection from adults' overprotectiveness, a place of experiencing joys, sorrows, failures, and successes at the child's scale. It is a space of self-definition, respect, being here and now for profoundly experiencing life in its many colors and standing for oneself (Koursoumba, 2013, p. 55). This was the space that Korczak advocated for in his *Orphans' Home*, this was the space he called for when describing the tasks of the school and the home, these were the very values he insisted on when he demonstrated "How to love a child," ahead of his era, so to speak, in understanding his or her essence. According to Koursoumba, Korczak's "conceptualization of children as full-fledged members of society, as individuals worth being appreciated for what they are, not for what they are expected to become, became the bedrock of a unique, as well as radical (for the time) humanistic way of perceiving the child" (Koursoumba, 2013, p. 55). To this day, this way of seeing and understanding the child is still inspiring researchers of childhood, as well as of children's art and culture.

Perhaps the above discussion on understanding the notion of the child will inspire the reader to "make guesses" about the child anew, and make a case for reshaping or broadening the understanding of the child in the new horizon of pedagogical anthropology. The essence of this analysis was not the ultimate creation of a new, single, "right" definition of the child, but the very process of knowing and understanding who the child is. Interpreting the notion of the child through the ontological categories of the human being led us to return to the initial question that inspired our analysis: What kind of a human being is a child?

At this point, however, I am not returning to the starting point anymore. I transcend it (following the principle of the hermeneutic spiral), and thus interesting areas open up for the important pedagogical implications of such an understanding of the child for early childhood education.

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