

## **Standing on the shoulders of Janusz Korczak**

An essay of five pages by Joop Berding, the Netherlands

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‘If I have seen further, it is by standing on the shoulders of giants’ (Isaac Newton, 1676). When you know the tradition in which you stand, you see more. This also applies to professionals who work with young children. On which educational theories does your work rest? To which educators do you owe your debt? On whose shoulders do you stand? In this article I present Janusz Korczak.

### **Who was Janusz Korczak?**

Janusz Korczak (1878-1942) was a Polish-Jewish doctor and pedagogue. In 1912 he became director of the orphanage Dom Sierot in Warsaw. There, together with his pupils, he organized a democratic form of living together. Respect, justice and participation were central ideas. His most important book is *How to love a child* from 1919. Korczak stood up for the rights of children and is one of the founders of thinking about this. In August 1942 Korczak, his co-worker Stefania Wilczyńska, and the 200 children of the orphanage were murdered in the Treblinka extermination camp.

### **Core ideas of Korczak**

Korczak was not an educational philosopher or theorist, but he laid the foundation for ideas about upbringing and education that we now find quite common: taking children seriously and involving them in everyday life. Talking to children and listening to them. Show respect for who they are and try to resolve inevitable quarrels and conflicts in a peaceful way.

Korczak was a storyteller, a poet, a man of music and plays, and some of the best children’s books of the 20th century came from his imagination and through his pen on paper. He was a person for whom education was about real, ‘lived’ experience. He wrote a lot about it: novels, poems, essays, diaries, prayers, plays, short notes and letters. Besides *How to love a child* he wrote ‘The right of the child to respect’, about the lack of appreciation for children. Of his novels the most famous are *When I am little again* and the children’s books about King Matt.

The core of his pedagogical thinking is formed by the question: who is the child? What makes him or her human? What is humanity? What makes a society human? Korczak combines different levels of experience: the individual level, that of the community and of society, and even of humanity as a whole. Korczak is not a child-centered pedagogue, although he has written a lot about children. He always takes children in their social context, and addresses the questions about justice that arise when people live together.

Like everyone else Korczak was once a beginner, he had to learn the trade by trial and error. His first experiences as an educator were in the summer camps held around 1900 for children from Warsaw. In his first year Korczak acted the ‘liberal’ educator, who liked everything as long as it didn’t bother him and he had a good time. The result was chaos and Korczak had to act in an authoritarian way. He considered himself a failed educator. In the second year he had

learned to create order first and thus create a basis for the dialogue with the children, instead of mainly talking to them. He put the children in a circle and discussed what everyone wanted to do and contribute to the success of the camp. In case of arguments or fights, he let the children talk to each other and acted as a mediator. Korczak described all these experiences with great honesty and soul searching in *How to love a child*.

Korczak was a true democrat, politically and also when it came to raising children. He put his ideals into practice in several orphanages, in close co-operation with a small staff, headed by Stefania Wilczyńska, gently called 'Madame Stefa'. As a pedagogue Korczak was strongly influenced by Pestalozzi. Children were stimulated to participate actively, but were also given rest when they needed it. In addition, it was undeniable that Korczak had been trained as a paediatrician. He was an intense observer of children, wrote countless notes about them and kept track of growth curves. Fortunately, we can still read many of those observations.

Although Korczak has not developed a systematic theory, some important principles can be seen in his working and living with children: respect, participation and justice. The basis is respect for children, not because they can always have their way, but to indicate that children do have their own wishes, desires, dreams, expectations and motives that are at least worth listening to. Not everything can be fulfilled: the great task for educators is precisely to teach children to live *together* with others – whom they have often not chosen themselves – who also have their desires and dreams. This is where Korczak's unique contribution to pedagogy comes into the picture. In order to resolve disputes between children, which occur in every group or class, Korczak did not follow the authoritarian line, but a democratic one. In his orphanage, conflicts were discussed by a court consisting of children. The residents could lodge complaints, after which the accused was allowed to defend himself. Everything was recorded in writing. Seldom a punishment was handed out. A typical judgment of the court is: 'The accused committed an offence. Too bad, he shouldn't have done that. But he is now trying to improve his behaviour'. Only children with extreme behaviour were suspended, which only happened once or twice in the thirty-year history of the orphanage. Korczak also had to appear in court once because he had slipped off the banister, which was forbidden. He was forgiven. Korczak understood only too well that children see rules as a challenge and break them. Not punishment but forgiveness was the key concept and there was always the hope that children would improve their behaviour. So they were always given new opportunities.

This way of working had the underlying idea that the striving for fair relations can come not only from adults, but also from the children. In that respect Korczak had an optimistic child image. A second idea was that the discussions by the children's court were public, not in 'back rooms'. This is perhaps the most typical of what Korczak intended and what I call a 'republican' way of living together. It concerns the general concern (the *res publica*), the general interest in which various individual interests are weighed up against each other. Conflicts between children can affect an entire community, the group or the classroom and therefore it is important that they are involved in settling them. In this way, the group can also be 'healed'. This is one of the many ways in which children participate in the daily affairs, next to, for example, a parliament and practical tasks.

## **Korczak and the young child then and now**

There are few pedagogues, then or now, who have dedicated as many pages to the daily life of children as Korczak. As far as that is concerned, he will appeal to anyone who wants to (further) train herself in observing children and especially in interpreting their behaviour. For example, Korczak describes the differences that already exist between babies with regard to their temperament, strength, intelligence, mood and life experience. The fact that children (and more generally: people) differ is a key point of his pedagogy. It is precisely these differences that make human coexistence interesting, but also sometimes difficult. Korczak has a special view on the pedagogical relationship between educator (parent or teacher) and child. The challenge is to base your actions on your own observation and reflection. General data on children's development may inform educators but never replace the specific educator-child relationship. However, it is very difficult to determine what to do, no matter how well you observe. Pedagogically speaking, there are other things to do. Korczak writes:

Thanks to medical science, I have learned with great difficulty to connect the most diverse details and conflicting symptoms into a logically recognizable image. And although I am rich as far as my insights into the power of the laws of nature and the power of the genius of human research are concerned, I am faced with an unknown greatness: the child.

Dealing with the child, says Korczak, is like reading a book with unknown characters (think of the hieroglyphs from Egypt). Children are not 'makeable'. Again and again you have to observe children and interpret their motives. Especially young children are still so changeable that you have to be careful not to want to 'pinpoint' them on what they happen to show, now.

## **Korczak's inspiration**

For many teachers and pedagogical staff in child care, schools, social groups, therapeutic settings etc. worldwide, Korczak has become a source of inspiration for their dealings with children. This does not mean that there are now suddenly children's courts everywhere, nor does that have to be at all, even though there are now beautiful examples of this in secondary schools in a number of countries. What it *does* mean is that educators are confronted with questions such as: do you treat children with respect? What is your view of 'the good life' with and for children? How do you organize the participation of children? How do you make sure that everyone can come into their own, but never at the expense of someone else? With this kind of questions as a guide you can start looking for answers that fit the group and preferably look *together with them*. This sometimes requires patience, because a lot of voices need to be heard. The group meeting is an important tool in this. Korczak can inspire educators for a much 'slower' practice than we are used to nowadays, in our over-hurried times.

## **In practice**

Children argue and fight, that will never change. Sometimes they cross borders, that's also always been the case. Instead of forbidding quarrels, Korczak kept track of how often that happened. When it went out of scuffles, he put the children in a circle and discussed with them: how can we have less quarrels? All kinds of ideas came up. With statistics, Korczak kept track of what happened next: fewer arguments? That's great! Or after a few days a bit more? Then another conversation. Today's teachers can collect these kinds of facts and get a better idea of the ins and outs of their group.

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