

REVIEW

The Republic of Children*

A clear introduction to the life and work of the Polish-Jewish pedagogue Janusz Korczak.

A review of Berding, J. (2020). *Janusz Korczak. Educating for Justice*. Springer, approx. €55 (softcover book), approx. €43 (E-book) ISBN 9783030592493 (softcover), ISBN 9783030592509 (E-book) <https://link.springer.com/book/10.1007/978-3-030-59250-9>

by Gerrit Breeuwsma, Developmental Psychology, University of Groningen, the Netherlands

Introduction

Anyone who studies the history of pedagogy and education can easily get the impression that the greatest pedagogues have often also been the greatest radicals of their time. It already starts with Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712-1778) who in his famous *Émile* (1762) calls on the readers to do everything radically differently than they were used to until now. His pedagogy was not only a teaching theory, but also a social critique: in order to change society, it is necessary to take up the education of the child. After him, others, from Pestalozzi to Montessori, are barely inferior to Rousseau, and if radicalism is a criterion for a great pedagogue, then Janusz Korczak (1878-1942) fits perfectly into that tradition.

In his short biography of Korczak, Joop Berding confirms this image of radicalism, in which Korczak not only described his radical vision of education, but also followed it himself. The modest size does not make it possible to write an all-encompassing ‘definitive’ biography, but lends itself well to a first acquaintance. Berding has succeeded excellently in this with his clear introduction to the life and works of Korczak. One of the merits of the book is that it makes people curious about Korczak’s own work. Fortunately, quite a few of these are already available in English translations, including *The Republic of Children*, *How to Love a Child* and ‘The child’s right to respect’.

A practice of experience

In his introduction, Berding places Korczak in the pedagogical tradition, pointing out the kinship with Johann Heinrich Pestalozzi (Korczak was sometimes called the Polish Pestalozzi), Friedrich Froebel and John Dewey. He shares their emphasis on the importance of play as a space in which the child can operate free from the direct interference of adults. He also considers the role of music, stories and gatherings important for the development of children.

At the same time, Korczak deviates in a number of respects from the work of his predecessors. He did not really develop a theory, nor was he interested in it, according to Berding, but mainly sketched (or rather: lived) a practice of the experience and interaction with children. His work is primarily a participatory method, if method is the right word here. This emphasis on participation is an important merit of Korczak’s work, but makes it more difficult to attach a movement to him. This is perhaps responsible for the fact that Korczak has had few real imitators and does not enjoy much fame among the general public, not even among educators. Wrongly, according to Berding.

A colourful life

The unfamiliarity with Korczak is not due to a lack of drama in his life. It is not only colourful, but is also largely determined by the political entanglements in and around Poland during the first half of the twentieth century and, above all, the role of National Socialism and anti-Semitism. The consequences of this have been personally experienced by Korczak in the worst possible way.

Korczak, the scion of a wealthy Jewish family, was born in Warsaw in 1878 (or 1879; that is not entirely certain) as Henryk Goldszmit. He was not a strong child, was a lot to himself and was absorbed in his games. His father died when he was 17 or 18 years old, probably as a result of his alcoholism, but a psychiatric condition also played a role. For Korczak, it was a reason not to want children of his own.

In 1898 he entered (and won) a writing competition with the submission of a short story, using the name Janusz Korczak. He would then write several stories, novels and children's books, in addition to pedagogical essays. Between 1898 and 1904 he studied medicine. In his approach to children, Korczak always had something of a diagnostician, someone who looked at a child and his behaviour with a perceptive eye.

Korczak got his first experiences with children when he worked in summer camps in the years 1904-1908. There he learned what occupied them (to come to the conclusion that every child remains essentially a mystery), but at least as much also what possessed him, what his shortcomings were in his understanding of and dealing with children.

During one evening a conflict arises between the children, who also turn against him during his intervention, during which Korczak, unable to contain the children and his own anger, comes to an important insight. As an adult you should not talk to, but with children; children have the right to their own voice. Korczak started organizing meetings with children, where they could speak for themselves, give their arguments, and this gave birth to his idea of 'participation'. Berding describes the insights that Korczak derived from his confrontation with the children as a true 'Pauline moment' (the conversion of 'Saul' to 'Paul').

Jewish orphanage

His most important merits, however, come from working in the Jewish orphanage Dom Sierot, of which he will be director for thirty years, with interruptions (due to the First World War). Here he learns to work with children, and he soon realizes that children sometimes learn better from each other than from him. The idea of the Children's Court also originated in the orphanage. In it, children learn to speak and judge behaviour in a public setting, in order to learn to think about good and evil in the most practical way. The orphanage is the epitome of what Korczak called 'the children's republic'.

In the meantime, however, outside the orphanage, evil increasingly took over. After the occupation of Poland by the Nazis, the orphanage is soon moved to the Warsaw Ghetto. In 1942 the children are deported by train to the Treblinka extermination camp. The story goes that Korczak – he had already gained quite a reputation – was offered by an SS officer to escape from the transport. But he refused and became a legend. He was destroyed along with his children.

Respect, participation, justice

In three chapters, Berding outlines some central notions in Korczak's work, condensed in the terms respect, participation and justice, which together form the basis for the functioning of his republic of children.

The child can only be taken seriously if his individuality as a person is fully respected. Korczak has tried to capture this in the rights of the child, and the way in which he formulates them immediately illustrates his originality. It is about children's right to their own death (for example, they can take risks), the right to today (it may not work once, because tomorrow is another day) and the right to be as they are (one shouldn't want to make a child what it isn't). All these rights, when considered properly, are about the autonomy of the child. The child is his own, not someone else's and although this does not mean that adults are side-lined, the child's perspective should form the basis for action and not that of the adults. With these rights Korczak is already taking a step towards the Rights of the child as they are now accepted by most countries (but unfortunately not always respected).

Voice of the child

Participation is a key concept in Korczak working with children. In the orphanage, the child's voice was made concrete in every possible way, by converting it into possibilities for action. It was embodied by a simple information board in the entrance hall of the orphanage, but also by the creation of a parliament and the orphanage's own newspaper. In fact, children were given all the tools to participate in the orphanage's community, based on democratic principles. Here, too, Korczak leaves his mark on current events, where children's participation and citizenship are discussed.

Finally, Korczak's idea of justice is made concrete in his institution of the children's court in the orphanage. It is not up to adults to judge children unilaterally, but children themselves should be involved in the justice system. For that matter, Korczak was not primarily concerned with passing judgment (or condemnation), but with understanding and forgiving a transgression. That everyone is in principle equal before the law is apparent from the fact that Korczak himself was subjected to it a number of times. Justice stands or falls with the capacity for self-criticism.

Berding notes that things did not go smoothly in the children's republic and that there was sometimes dissatisfaction with the court or that the quality of their own newspaper sometimes left something to be desired, but the imperfections in the process are also characteristic of a democratic society, and underline Korczak's realism.

We don't give you anything...

Berding concludes his biography with a brief reflection on the enormous impact Korczak must have had on his children, citing the farewell-note that children received when they left the home: 'We give you nothing,' Korczak writes in it, no God, no homeland, no love, but the desire to find it within yourself.

'We don't give you anything.' At first glance, these are harsh words from a man who knew how frugal life served many of his children, but they are also the words of a man who is

confident in his approach. But above all, there is confidence in the children with whom he shared his life.

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