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## Reflections from a school councillor inspired by Korczak's heritage

### ABSTRACT

In this short article inspired by Korczak's life and works I want to present my opinions and views as a teacher and a tutor, working with today's youngsters. Can Korczak's thoughts truly inspire today's generation of teachers? Is there a chance to apply them in today's school? All my thoughts and reflections are both from participant's and observer's point of view. In this paper I will refer to selection of Korczak's works (such as his ghetto diary) and their academic interpretations. I will discuss issues of children's democracy reflected in educational practice, utilize children's rights perspective looking into processual understanding of oneself as an educator and as a human being, before trying to find deeper understanding of a child or a youth. I will tie Korczak's ideas with my personal experiences, stressing out their potentiality for a more sensitive and empathetic school environment, where youths of today are already the adults of tomorrow, living here and now.

### KEY WORDS

Korczak, children's rights, educator, auto-ethnography, school

### CYTOWANIE

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## Introduction

In this short collection of Korczak inspired thoughts on in-classroom practice, I utilize the auto ethnographic perspective (Odrowaz-Coates 2014) and a reflexive autobiography (c.f. Odrowaz-Coates, Perkowska-Klejman 2016), where I am both the object and the narrator of my study, being a school councilor and an educator

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involved in the knowledge production processes (c.f. Hessels & Lente 2008) and a two way transmitter between the education system and the children I come in contact with.

### **Pedagogue's hopes and frustrations**

My inspiration for this paper comes from certain level of frustration, where I find myself thorn between my own professional and personal drive and the alternative perspective of my students. I work with young people aged 13-15. These are youngsters, who are convinced that they know everything best. They revolt against all orders and prohibitions. This is the age in which they shape their character and their value systems as well as they start thinking about their future, their own place in this global village. My job as an educator is to show and tell my students how important it is for them to be aware of their strengths and strong points, so that they can be tolerant, open-minded, and not afraid of what is still unknown.

Every day I meet young people convinced that Poland is a bad country to live in and that it presents them with no opportunity for development. They are certain that as adults they will go abroad to live in a better world. The truly sad part is that these people do negate everything they have, without even trying to appreciate what they actually can achieve here and now. My job as a teacher is to show them how diverse the world is, but it seems difficult of they are so ashamed of their national history and the value of their nation – they will simply bring nothing to the new global world. I am showing them the advantages of the globalization, highlighting the fact that they can freely travel abroad, travel to Erasmus, or take part in such international projects as the Odyssey of the Mind. I also feel that my responsibility is to make them realize the possible threats of the globalization as well as its opportunities. I want to train my students to be able to talk face to face - not just through social networking sites, because I know they can do it well if they care enough. I want to teach them how to live with others, not just among them. I would like them to leave school as their best versions of themselves, which means being tolerant, respectful and understanding that the unknown does not mean worse. Also knowing that meeting with someone outside of their environment and comfort zone has always been regarded as an opportunity for development. I try to teach all of this on a daily basis in my class, where both healthy and disabled children learn and work together. I want to make my pupils aware of the fact that the world awaits them, but they need to be ready to go beyond the stereotypes, without their complexes, but at the same time with great respect for both themselves and other people.

## Knowing oneself

I have been working in school for 12 years and just recently I have let myself understand the core meaning of Korczak's words: „*Do not demand of yourself that you become right away an earnest, full-fledged educator with psychological bookkeeping in your heart and an educational code in your head*”. (Korczak, 1967: 248-249)

I have always wanted to help everyone and understand everything, but it takes time and what is more important, a great deal observation to do so. There are some things and behaviors, which I may never be able to fully understand, because my students are much more experienced in life than me. And I believe it is my duty as an educator to be attentive and notice the moments when I should be for them. Sometimes they come for help of their own will, but the others may say that they don't need me – which is caused by their character and fear of revealing themselves and asking for help. And this is when I should especially let them know I am for them.

“Get to know yourself” – I have been doing it every day and it amazes me. As a child I had a great problem with reading and now I am a trainer at speed reading! I have always been a dyslectic making thousands of spelling mistakes and now I have teaching of spell correctly! What is more, I have always been shy at speaking in public, and now it comes easily for me and I really enjoy it! How did it happen? I do things which were the biggest problems for me. I have lately discovered that I simply like being afraid. When I feel some fears, I know I will develop and I will overcome myself and my fears. I also know that I will do that only when somebody gives me an inspiration and believes in me more than I believe myself. This is how I want to work with my students – be an inspiration and support for them. I want to show – based on my life- that nothing is final and we can change our fate. The fact that I can't do something now, doesn't mean that we can't change that. I always remind my students: “there is no failure, just feedback” (Hoffman, Misiak-Zbierska, Wojtczak, 2007:110)

I don't want to be a teacher, who has a solution to every problem. I try to fight it because the adults often want to solve students' problems themselves – and I think it's important that they learn how to deal with them on their own. We should support them, infect them with passion, give them hope and share our experiences with them, but not live their lives.

Since last week I have been observing my students and thanks to this, I get to know myself and my reactions to different situations and behaviors . By getting to know them, I get to know myself better.

## Understanding a child

*“As life is infinite, so the learning of the children is an infinite task. Understanding the child is like reading a book that reveals new pages and changes its text every day”* (Shner 2017:11). My eyes are getting bigger and bigger with every week, as I seem to understand more and more my students and their reality of everyday life. I am learning things I have already known about, but which at the same time, in the hustle and bustle of everyday life, I seem to forget - especially when considering the reality of a large, state school. As I have mentioned it before in my essays, it is frequent in such schools to forget each student’s individuality, their own families (also contributing to the process of shaping their personalities, character, and a general attitude towards education and life itself) and try to mold them into one and only “form” of a polite, obedient, and good pupil. It is easy to forget that students do differ from one another – and what is more, even one person changes in a matter of a day – inside, within their heart and soul. Korczak changes what we already know as: “You cannot enter twice the same river” (Section no. 91, in Diels, 1934 cf. Shner 2017:11) into something I had dedicated myself to learn by heart: *“Every time is a different woman who bids farewell to a different person and welcomes a different one upon his return”* (Korczak, 1967:370, cf. Shner 2017:11). It is especially true for my work, in which I meet on the daily basis students suffering from both Autism and Asperger Syndrome – I need to remind myself that we are all part of a nature, which is constantly changing, and which constantly surprises us with something new every day. That is why a sensitive child changes just the same way and it is our task to keep up with the changes, to try to get to know them better and better with every day, every new situation. Korczak was just like that: he had always time to talk to the students and to get to know them better, whereas in today’s reality teachers are supposed to make plenty of tests, surveys, plans, analysis, and outcomes and in order to actually talk to the student, we need to organize some sort of special classes, e.g. tutoring (like individual, face-to-face meetings).

Korczak says that the child does not belong to anyone, it does not have any owner, but is it really so? Don’t we treat the children as some sorts of “puppets” in our hands? We often first tell them about the need for independence and say: “do what you think you should do’, only to take offence later, when they do otherwise than we expect them to. As we read in Shehnaz Hnawy article, it is parents who often destroy the spiritual development of their children instead of enhancing it. Unfortunately, it also happens that even teachers may sometimes destroy the child in a similar way, when they fail to see the child in a unique way and focus on the family background instead,

seeing the child as if through one-dimension only ('I know his family, his father/brother/cousin etc. and I know nothing good will come out of him' – seeing the previous generation trail it is easy to assume the child has no other possibilities to follow). Luckily, they are very rare cases. Korczak demands a lot from the teachers, because he sees the education as the art (not the occupation), which requires great dedication – and even though I agree with him, I can also see how difficult it is to incorporate in today's school reality. But I have also found out that it is much more effective and wise to simply spend the time with the students, instead of taking up another course or formal studies... This is the homework I have dedicated myself to do now, before the Christmas: to get to know my students better and get to the core of their personal stories.

### **Helpful transgressions drawn from reading Korczak**

I have always associated Janusz Korczak as a pedagogue and author of „King Matt the First” whose quotation „A good tutor is someone who: doesn't force, but triggers, doesn't pull down, but motivates to raise, doesn't give orders, but explains, doesn't demand, but asks questions and thus they can experience some great moments with children”(Wolter (135)/2004). I have always had pinned in my work office, even though it was difficult to apply it in everyday school work.

This week has let me get to know Korczak better. I have read the articles and I have also watched a film about him which made a huge impression on me. The director, Wajda, in this black and white film presents the powerlessness of people against the evil and monstrosities of war. And Korczak himself was portrayed as a person who wasn't frightened of them and did his usual job. Staying faithful to his values. Until the last moment of his life he wanted to give the children a sense of normality at those abnormal times.

His attitude towards children with about even the most difficult “adult” subjects is worthy of admiration, because he never hid the truth or pretended anything in front of them. As it often happens with us, adults, - we don't or can't talk honestly with our children, saying that they are too little to understand. Korczak gave children the right to discuss and express their opinions about everything they wanted as well as to decide about themselves according to his words...“there are no children, just people”.

Korczak was born too early for his times with his way of thinking about raising up the children. I believe that me and other teachers (with whom I have discusses the topic) shall learn from him regarding the respect for children: since we often tend to see ourselves as superior to our students thinking we are better, smarter and always

more right than them. We “put” them in some sort of a “box” of a “polite children” expecting that they will comply oblige and agree with us without their individual thinking. And, as we know everybody is different, but we often forget about it, so as our work is easier. But the real question is are we ready to change it and stand in front of Korczakowski’s “children court”?

In my opinion the ending of the film “Korczak” is the best of all possible...We all know how the story ended and we don’t need the director to show it to us literally. Wajda doesn’t show us the gas chamber itself, but just the faces of smiling children running into the mysterious fog...smiling, because they are free forever.

My reflection is...to follow Korczak who strongly believed in what he did and could give up himself in order to save the children. As he said himself (in this film) “I would go to the devil himself to save them”. And therefore I shall see a human being in everyone and treat them with respect, because in today’s world “to save” may possibly mean to give our time to listen and have an honest discussion with our students.

### **What does the ghetto diary tell me – the educator?**

Korczak wanted to give the children a sense of security in the world where every hour could be their last – the omnipresent air of death made them familiarized with it, but I doubt whether they were really aware of what could happen to them. When they saw a dead boy, they didn’t run scared, but they just moved in another place, so that his dead body didn’t interrupt their play. And that’s why I think that Korczak was so successful in his being a father to nearly 200 children – he gave them the belief that everything was all right. He didn’t put hid problems or fears of the future on them, he kept all his concerns about everyday life (for example food) for himself. He fought everyday to save the life in his orphanage. For we can be dead being alive, especially at times of such hopelessness. Korczak didn’t let for that. He “kept fighting” and lived for his children. He didn’t leave them alone at the most important moment, even thought he could save himself – this is what real father would do. That is why I consider Korczak a “real father” who would give up his life if that could save his children. Despite not having his own children, he was a 100% father in full meaning of this word.

Article “The Doctor in the waiting room of death” (Shner, 2013) let me see Korczak from a different perspective- one of a stoic who accepted death. What my attention was the fact that death shouldn’t promote the passiveness and indifference – it should rather raise the consciousness responsibility of their daily actions in their short lives. This attitude is the essential part of Korczak’s way of raising the

children. He made the orphanage “the safest place” for his children where they were fought on a daily basis values such as honesty, truth and responsibility. And also not being quick at judging people.

We can frequently read in his “Ghetto diary” that he was a little exhausted with his life (saying “I lack volition, not the physical strength”) But for his children he was always the strong one. He had his “demons” at night and we can see what troubled him (the death was present even in his dreams) As he wrote in his diary: “It is difficult to be born and learn how to life. It is a much easier job: die”. (Korczak, 1996:78)

How did Korczak prepare his children for death? He give them so much love and safety that they went with him proudly and with great thrust, together with their caretakers, holding their hands. This peaceful march proves me that Korczak fought for his children dignity until the final moment – in a situation when everything tells us that we should save ourselves, run, beg for live...Korczak showed Germans that they could take his life but they couldn't take his dignity as a human being and they couldn't take his children from him. Could he life if he abandoned his children choosing himself? I don't know because...as he said in his diary: “Is it possible to understand someone else's life, someone's memories?” (Korczak, 1996:54).

### **Children's democracy in school**

As teachers we take a lot from Korczak's works every day. We have “class government” deciding about its things (for example taking part in half-term and final-term behavior grading). There is also a “school government” consisting of students who represent the school itself, especially in constructing the school statute. It's hard to disagree with Korczak that the respect towards children means also accepting their limitations and giving our help for their better development. I think that we should carefully observe the children because at first they are very egoistical and they want everything for themselves. And only while growing up and being socialized they can learn to notice the needs of others. Shouldn't it be us who give them the safe space and possibilities to learn this? We can do it by giving them more and more chances to decide about themselves.

I have been in charge of school voluntary group for many years – or should I say: I have been taking care of it? During our every week meetings the students themselves decide about and choose the actions they want to take part in. Through discussions and convincing others to their points of view they decide what they want to do. They learn the democracy, responsibility for their decisions, trust and hard-work. They get a lot of experience and skills (e.g. organizing groups classes, speaking in front of the whole school society). Even though at first

they can feel only fear, with time they learn how to do it, they can trust themselves knowing that we are nearby.

In my school there is also a school newspaper, but it is about a cooperation between experienced adults and learning youngsters. It is wonderful for both parts, because the youngsters can infect us with their energy, enthusiasm and – the most important – the faith that they can do everything they want, and we- the adults- share our knowledge with them. There is no signals that adults disturb the students, that they want to do everything their own way. I believe that by giving them the freedom and staying only helping voice, we can be sure that they will never feel that we decide for them and that somebody breaks their right to decide about themselves.

I think that young people deserve to be trusted and should have the possibility of saying what they really think about things that concern them. And it is our duty to listen to them carefully. Because the dialogue is the most important thing – the ability to convince others to our points of view instead of simply dictating them. By giving children the possibility of speaking out in schools, or any other institutions, we show them that this is also their place and they create it and they are responsible for what is happening there. They become more active when they know that can create something and have an influence on things. And this is exactly our aim.

## Conclusions

I find that many academics pursue Korczak's thought. A huge selection of such works can be found in Liebel & Markowska-Manista (2017). Others focus on Korczak's biography (Smolinska-Theiss 2013, Silverman 2017), yet I struggle to find practitioners referencing his influence in their classroom practice (perhaps apart from Avi Tsur, but he is also an academician). I feel inspired to change this and to include the voice of an active educator, writing about Korczak almost a hundred years after him. I find it important to seek his heritage and to implement it in classroom practice, to become more at peace with oneself and to better oneself. I hope that this paper will also inspire others to reflect on Korczak's thoughts and his philosophy.

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