

Participation, citizenship and community. Janusz Korczak's Radical View

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Introduction

During one of the training sessions I organize for group-leaders in day-care centers I sensed much sympathy for Janusz Korczak, his ideas and his connectedness to children. Many were impressed by the facts of his life, and the sad way it ended in August 1942. There was admiration for the way in which Korczak not only talked about education but also put his ideas into practice. But at the end of the workshop one of the participants asked me, Do I really have to organize a children's court in my group 4-year olds? This was a serious question, and nevertheless I wondered if I had succeeded in transmitting what really motivated Korczak when he himself installed the children's court in his orphanage and wrote the Constitution. Because what motivated Korczak was not all about the 'form' of the court, it was about 'content', and the content, for him, was *justice*. And justice is a very relevant issue for a group 4-year olds when we learn from research that 80% of them is either a doer or a victim of bullying. Justice, and the permanent strife for it and arguing about it, was one of the key motivators for Korczak in his life both as a physician and as an educator. And he would hardly have understood the question put to me, Do I really have to organize a children's court in my group 4-year olds? Because for Korczak any imitation, of him, or of his 'style' in bringing up children, was anathema. He said:

'Be true to yourself, seek your own road. Learn to know yourself before you attempt to learn to know the children. You should realize what you are capable of before you begin to bring home to the children the scope of their rights and duties. Of them all, you yourself are the child, whom you must learn to know, rear, and above all, enlighten' (Korczak 1967, 248).

To become an educator

No one can really teach someone else what it means to be an educator (cp. Berding 2004). Korczak himself went to a painful process to discover this, and significantly this was almost ten years before he went to work as the director of the children's orphanage Dom Sierot in Warsaw in 1912. For in 1904 he went along as a group leader in one of the summer-camps for proletarian children from Warsaw who went to the country-side for a number of weeks. As Korczak describes in detail, everything that might go wrong actually did go wrong. In his *naiveté*, Korczak was hardly prepared for what it meant to be in charge of a group of around 30 children. He wanted the trip and the subsequent holiday to be a pleasant occasion –for *him!* He brought some fireworks, a gramophone, and some toys, and did not make any special arrangements, trusting that everything would run smoothly. He wrote: 'In the naive belief that it was all very easy, I was captivated by the charm of the assignment ahead of me' (Korczak 1967, 333). He hadn't imagined that it took authority, order and structure, and especially anticipation to have a group of children and educators live together in an acceptable fashion. The trip to the country outside Warsaw, which knew several stages –by train, cart and horse, and on foot-, turned into chaos. Children jumped out of the train, fought and cried, and overwhelmed Korczak with their worries, homesickness, questions and problems. Then, arriving at the camp, it seemed that Korczak still hadn't learned, for when the children were

asked to change into their summerclothes, chaos augmented. Still, things got worse: 'How should the children be seated at the table? I had not anticipated this problem either. I decided hastily at the last moment, in conformity with the paramount principle of freedom, to let them sit as they liked', Korczak reflected (idem, 339). The effect however of this 'principle' was that children constantly changed seats, which hampered the educator to recognize them. At the end of that day, when Korczak made his final –and wrong- estimation, letting the children pick their own bed in the dormitory, he '... was vaguely conscious of the defeats but too dumbfounded to be able to look for the sources' (idem, 340). A bad night followed, and contemplating what happened that day, Korczak came to the conclusion that in spite of his knowledge of child psychology, he was at a loss. He didn't have the faintest idea how to get through the month that lay ahead. During the night the children fought again, and Korczak feelings were hurt, as he described: 'So that was their response to my kindness, zeal, effort. (...) The crystal edifice of my dreams had come toppling down' (idem, 343).

Gradually, Korczak began to understand what went wrong. He reflected on his own need of a happy holiday, and began to see how his own lack of seriousness has influenced the process within the group. Some days later, there was a real crisis: at night some boys gathered sticks to have a fight. And now Korczak abandoned his 'sentimental' attitude, took the sticks away, and announced that they would talk the next day. This was a decisive moment in the relation between the educator and the children, for as it turned out the next day: '... during a get-together in the forest, for the first time I spoke not to the children but *with* the children. I spoke not of what I would like them to be, but of what they would like to and could be. Perhaps then, for the first time, I found out that one could learn a great deal from children; that they make, and have every right to make demands, conditions, reservations' (idem, 345). Instead of lecturing children, he invited them participate in the common tasks: keeping the woods free of litter, stop noise at the meals, organize baths and outings. Now Korczak developed a first sensitivity of children's individual differences. The following year at the new summercamp, he displayed a fundamentally different attitude. First of all, he learned all the children's name by heart, so that he could address them in a personal way. Second, he made notes about everything that was interesting in the children. These observations became his 'material', much like a librarian rummages through a newly arrived pile of books (idem, 355). Furthermore, he didn't give the children unlimited freedom, but took the lead in the organization of the group. For instance, he collected the postcards that the children wanted to send home, he took care of the money, he asked older children to help him. When a younger child cried, he send a boy to console him, '... he would do it better than I, and anyway a few tears do no harm' (idem, 356).

Everything depended now on organization, foresight, observation, and involving the group as a whole. In the evening, Korczak told stories about last year's events, he told the children what to do in case they woke up in the night. Calm spread over the group. Korczak even found time to make some more notes. In the following days the group organized itself more and more, but Korczak was well aware of the social processes that were going on. A boy of twelve had a hold, and a negative influence on the group. Instead of lecturing, Korczak spoke with him on the conditions of his stay in the summercamp, as a talk between equals. For this boy had already made a career in criminality, there was no reason to be 'soft' on him. They came to an agreement, and at the end shook hands (idem, 361). The same display of sense for the 'real' life could be seen in Korczak's treatment of children's fights. He did not forbid them to fight (which would be unrealistic), but kept track of the number of fights. He even made a curve of it, and showed it to the children: 'July 5 – 30 children, twelve fights; a meeting to stop fighting; next day three fights only; again eight and ten –then six fights. Second meeting' (idem, 369), and so on. 'After a fortnight, one fight only' (ibid.). Korczak organized meetings on several subjects like swimming in the river, the mess in the toilet, and

he concluded: 'The children's assistance is absolutely essential to the teacher, the prerequisite being, however, constant vigilant control and a duty roster' (idem, 372). Furthermore there were no privileges attached to doing a task: it was a case of honor. By 'spreading' all the necessary tasks across the entire group, the educator had time to devote to children who had special needs (cf. Berding 1995).

Lessons learned

What did Korczak learn from these experiences, or rather from his harsh self-reflection on them? First of all he learned to do away with the sentimentality of education. Being an educator is a tough job, because

'(a) teacher starting out with the sweet illusion that he is entering a little world of pure, affectionate and open-hearted souls whose good will and confidence are easy to win will soon be disappointed. ... The group will include the gentle, the passive, the good-natured as well as the most wicked, malicious, intriguers and delinquents, the openly hostile and perverse in initiative, or the hypocritically submissive, and surreptitiously spiteful. ... I had read numerous books on child psychology. And in spite of all that, here I was helpless, confounded by the mystery of the collective soul of a children's community' (Korczak 1967, 308-309, 341).

I suppose many practitioners have had the experience that there comes a moment that you just don't know what to do with a group. It just won't work between you and the pupils, there is no 'chemistry'. It took Korczak long hours and days of careful and patient observation to find out what was wrong between him and the group, and the main thing he learned was that the 'wrongness' was *not* with the children: it was with him, he says; he was looking for some days of fun, he didn't bother about the kids, he never was really interested in them (Korczak, 1967, 343). But when the kids turned to violence, and threatened to beat each other with sticks, it was there and then that Korczak saw what was really going on. This is where it stops, he said, now we're going to talk (idem, 345). I have always felt that this was Korczak's 'Paulinian' turn as an educator (cp. New Testament, Acts, chapter 9).

The second lesson Korczak learned, and this pointed the way to children's participation, is that he discovered that to speak of 'education' in any acceptable fashion meant that the children themselves had to be involved. Not 'over their heads', one might say of this participatory view of education. Indeed, these experiences and the way Korczak reflected upon them, make him one of the founding fathers of the movement for youth-participation in educational institutions. On Korczak's view the educational relation is one of partnership, not of power (cf. Eisler 2000). Let's see what this could mean in an educational setting today, in our own time.

Participation today

Some time ago I visited a class during one of their meetings and observed the following.

Class 4 is in a meeting. Today Yannic is chair. He looks around to see if everyone is ready to begin. Almost everyone is quiet. Yannic clears his throat and says: 'OK. Let's begin the meeting. Who has something to discuss?' Some kids raise their hands. One by one they get a chance to speak. Tashunka has a problem with the gymnastics teacher. She wants to solve it, but isn't sure how. Peter wants to discuss the use of the discovery-material. Vera is having trouble finishing her work. This week, Manita takes care of the proceedings. She makes a list of all the issues. Yannic suggests to start with the issue of the discovery-material. Peter is called upon to speak and starts talking.

Involving children in and making them responsible for the daily procedure is an important task for teachers. How do you make a group more than just an addition sum of individuals? How can you make sure a learning community arises? In a participative class children have a voice with regard to the daily routine. The week starts with an assembly. The assignments for the coming week can be discussed and, if the occasion arises, problems can come upon the table. Ideas are brought up, and discussed and then put into a working plan for the coming days. Throughout the day there is a flexible variety of plenary meetings, group-assignments and individual chores. Children register the assignments on a signboard and on overviews. In the middle of the week the group assesses the circumstances and discusses 'process' as well as 'product'. Once a week there is a classmeeting, of which the above is an example, where children can bring up issues concerning the atmosphere in the group. This meeting is not only for discussing problems, good experiences are also shared. The chair circulates, as well as the keeping of proceedings. Everyone's contribution is appreciated and is stimulated. Children are involved in every group-activity as do-ers and thinkers. The meeting creates a 'public' space, a sort of 'agora' or 'forum' as in the ancient city-states, where issues can be discussed freely among peers. From this perspective this way of working can be regarded as a form of republicanism and a sound application of the very idea of democratic citizenship.

Democratic citizenship

When I look at the issue of democratic citizenship from a Korczak-ian perspective I think two matters are of importance (cp. Berding 2006). First of all Korczak draws our attention to the difference between education *about* citizenship and education *for* citizenship. It seems to me that just talking about democratic citizenship misses the point. What needs to be done is the creation of educational situations in which citizenship, that is taking part in what goes on in the public domain, is actually *practiced*. Children and youth must be allowed an active role in the establishment of a better quality of public life. Korczak goes *beyond* education about and for democracy: he practiced education *through* democracy. It is time that schools and other services offer opportunities to the young to act democratically.

Secondly, Korczak's view is about the *acceptance of differences* between people, and about finding ways of living together in human ways despite these differences. His constitutional view is of prime importance here, because it is an attempt to bridge the gap between competing interests and rights. It acknowledges that people do have different interests, and do have a right to defend them, but at the same time asks people to 'see the other side', to take a different perspective, to read the other's mind.

In conclusion, let me say that to my mind that a constitutional view of education is a key element of democratic citizenship and citizenship education. For the constitution has two sides: it defines my rights, and thus creates freedom, and on the other hand defines my limitations, for I am not alone. I am part of a community, made up of members who also have their rights. I am in the community, and the community is in me. So the constitution at once creates freedom and limits my actions. It also calls for negotiation and coordination of interests in the case of a clash or the threat of one. Rather than asking the adult to engage in a dispute about conflicting rights and interests, Korczak institutionalizes a process of mediation through an independent, 'objective' third perspective: the constitution, which is respected by all.

Concluding remarks

On Korczak's view, education deals with the creation of democratic culture. It puts its trust in the growing ability of young people to govern their own life, and to communicate their values and norms to others, and to negotiate on their sometimes differing interests. Ultimately,

Korczak's legacy, and inspiration, is a story about what counts as a 'good life'. In a good life children's and youngster's voices are heard (cp. Joseph 1999). Korczak put all his effort, all of his imagination, and all of his life-force to the creation of the very conditions for the children's voices to be heard. UNICEF in her 'State of the World's Children 2003' (UNICEF 2003) seems to echo these insights when she states:

'Put into practice, participation involves adults listening to children - to all their multiple and varied ways of communicating, ensuring their freedom to express themselves and taking their views into account when coming to decisions that affect them' (UNICEF 2003, 4).

This, indeed, has nothing to do with undermining the authority of adults in their dealing with children, but it has everything to do with creating the conditions for the young to learn and to assume responsibilities for the world in which they live. Janusz Korczak has shown us that in a world of crisis *a participative turn* can show a way out. It needs courage and great confidence in children and youngsters to take this turn, but on the other hand: what would education be without just that: *courage, confidence*, in other words: *faith*?

And how did the meeting continue?

Peter finds it unfair that Jim pushes him away all the time from the discovery-material. In this way he never can finish her assignment. Yannic asks Jim how he responds to this. Jim says that Peter takes too much time, and that he wants to do his assignment as well. Yannic asks the others if they've been doing their assignment already. Some have worked in pairs, some on their own. But it is not clear how long you're entitled to the material, and when it's your turn. Yannic asks if there are any suggestions to solve this. One says: 'If we are all allowed ten minutes'. 'No', says number two, 'a half hour'. 'As long as you like', says another child. Yannic proposes that they write down all their ideas on a piece of paper, and put it in the letter-box. Next meeting they will discuss further and decide on a procedure.

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