

The importance of Korczak's work in a post-truth world¹

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Abstract

Through this paper the major project of Janusz Korczak, one of the greatest educators of the twentieth century, will be discussed. Korczak worked with the purpose to create critical thinking and to give the right of free speech to all of his students. Moreover, he fought for children's rights. The Classroom Council and the Children's Court are some of the actions that he thought and implemented in his classroom. All these happened in order to help children understand through experiential learning the meaning of citizenship and to create future active citizens. In this paper, recent examples of the implementation of Korczak's project and its results in Greece will be reported. We are going through an era, in which extreme right political parties are rising, refugee crises have emerged, and mass media influence and reproduce erroneous news or falsified. It is remarkable that post-truth is considered the word of the year according to Oxford Dictionaries. Therefore, it is crucial that from childhood children have to learn to think critically and not be misled, to understand the importance of freedom of speech, and to respect dialogue and democracy.

Key Words

Janusz Korczak, children's rights, children's court, classroom council, post- truth world, education.

The main purpose of this paper is Korczak's work. Korczak whose real name is Henrik Goldsmit, was born in 1878 in Warsaw, from a Jewish middle class family. He studied medicine, worked as a pediatrician and was known as the doctor who helps the poor with no payment. In 1912, the Jewish society “Help the orphans” founded and financed an orphanage called *Dom Sierot*. Korczak was appointed as a director. *Dom Sierot* operated for 30 years from 1912 until 1942. In 1919, Korczak with the help of Maria Flask founded the *Nasz Dom*, in which I died in the First

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World War. In 1942, he was killed with the children from the orphanage in the extermination camp Treblinka by the Nazi German.

As he quoted "A hundred children, a hundred individuals who are people- not people to be- not people of tomorrow, but people now, right now –today." He was a teacher but not a teacher as we think a teacher is, but as a teacher should be.

Janus Korczak was a precursor to the revolutionary perception that defended the child's subjectivity. The phrase "they are not children, they are people" has been well known, and he was a supporter of children's emancipation and self-esteem at a time when absolute autocracy prevailed in adult-to-child relationships. He believed that adults should try to understand the child and respect it. The child is not a subhuman, but an accomplished one. One of his pedagogical innovations was the "Children's Court", which pointed and judged not only children's violations of the regulations but also violations of workers in the orphanage.

Children's Court

Korczak composed the Judicial Code in 1917 when he was in Kiev. The first 99 articles of the court code in the "House of the Orphan" are inspired so that the accused can be forgiven or be acquitted or even set free of charges. In fact, "everything happens as nothing ever happened," says Korczak. The other articles of the court code, Korczak numbered them 100, 200, 300 all the way up to 1000 apparently to impress. These articles are either warning or ratification articles. Instead of punishing, Korczak prefers to prevent, he prefers to make the accused child who discovers the laws, which govern life in the community, to understand the importance of these laws in order to better respect them in the future.

Classroom Council

All issues that concern the classroom can be discussed. For example, the rules of the class, preparing for an exhibition, a show, or how the weakest child could be helped. The aim of the council is to make students more responsible. They can propose, decide, organize, and evaluate. The classroom council should belong to the rights of the child as it is not only a process that allows free expression and problem solving, but a method through which the child learns to listen, speaks to others, asks, make suggestions.

Research in Greece

Through a small research in Greece, I found that the pedagogical team named *Skasiarhio* is one of the greatest promoters of Korczak's work. Through many

conferences, translation of his work and workshops, there is a huge attempt to promote his work not only to teachers but to children too.

As I interviewed one of the main members of the pedagogical team, it was clear that one of the purposes of Korczak's methods was to strengthen the autonomy and the responsibility cultivated in children through the work of this pedagogy. "Because we want the children to be autonomous, responsible, this responsibility will be built, by giving them responsible work to do, exploiting their potential, their rights, and after all they will build up their limits to coexist in the community." Finally, as far as education is concerned today, she focuses on the ignorance of teachers. "They are uninformed or misinformed...Teachers are totally ignorant of Korczak and, moreover, of his entire complex and his very deep thought. "

We compel children to shoulder mankind's responsibilities tomorrow, but give them none of the human rights today ... Were humanity to be divided into adults and children and life into childhood and adulthood, we should discover that the child occupies a very large part of the world and of life. But we ... are incapable of seeing the child, just as we earlier could not see women, peasants, oppressed social groups and oppressed people.

He is thought to be the 1st commissioner for children's rights. His thinking had a profound impact on the drafting of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. Many of them who formulated that treaty were inspired by his vision of the child as an individual subject – not merely an object belonging to adults. The Child Commissioner is an independent authority for the protection of children's rights, an institution that has existed in the world community since 1981, when the first Childhood Ordinance in Norway was appointed. Today there is a large number of Commissioners all over the world. The child commissioner's goal is a world where children's rights are recognized, respected and enforced, and where every rights violation has a remedy.

As we know, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) is a historic document that was adopted by the United Nations General Assembly, on 10 December 1948, right after the Second World War.

The Declaration consists of thirty articles. The articles from one to two established the basic concepts of dignity, liberty, equality, and brotherhood. Articles from three to eleven established other individual rights, such as the right to life and the prohibition of slavery. Articles from six to eleven refer to the fundamental legality of human rights with specific remedies cited for their defense when violated. Articles 12–17 established the rights of the individual towards the community (including such things as freedom of movement). Articles 18–21 sanctioned the so-called "constitutional liberties", and with spiritual, public, and political freedoms, such as freedom of thought, opinion, religion and conscience, word, and peaceful association of the individual. Articles 22–27 sanctioned an individual's economic, social and cultural rights, including healthcare. Articles 28—30 established the

general ways of using these rights, the areas in which these rights of the individual cannot be applied, and that they cannot be overcome against the individual.

Especially in Article 25 part two of the Declaration, the need of motherhood and childhood to "special protection and assistance" and the right of all children to "enjoy social protection" were recognized. So in 20 November 1959, the declaration of the rights of the child was proclaimed. This declaration consists of ten principles for the protection of children's rights, including the universality of rights, the right to special protection, and the right to protection from discrimination. This declaration was the basis of the Convention of the rights of the child, which was adopted by the United Nations General Assembly 30 years later, on November 20th 1989.

Children's rights are the human rights of children with particular attention to the rights of special protection and care afforded to minors. The Convention is an international human rights treaty that says all children are born with basic freedoms and rights. Such a treaty is an agreement between people or states where everyone agrees to obey the same law. The Convention defines the range of rights that children have to enjoy anywhere. It sets the basic conditions for the well-being of children at their various stages of development and is the world's first legal code of rights for children in history.

Children's rights include: the right to associate with both parents, the human identity as well as the basic needs for physical protection, the right to food, universal state-paid education, health care and criminal laws appropriate for the age of the child, the right of proper development of the child, equal protection of the child's civil rights, and freedom from discrimination on the basis of the child's race, gender, sexual orientation, gender identity, national origin, religion, disability, color, ethnicity, or other characteristics. More specifically article 28 of the Convention states that, "School discipline shall be administered in a manner consistent with the child's dignity. Education should be directed to the development of the child's personality, talents and abilities, the respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms, life in a free society, understanding, tolerance and equality, the development of respect for the natural environment".

But the truth is that we do not all conceive human rights in the same way. There are four different schools of thoughts: a) *natural schools* conceive human rights as given, b) *deliberative schools* as agreed upon, so it means that human rights do not exist beyond human rights law, c) *protest schools* conceive human rights as the reason to fight for the poor and the less fortunate and d) *discourse schools* as talked about, which means that human rights law is like any other law, and may be good or bad.

The introduction of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights states: "Every individual and every organ of society ... shall strive by teaching and education to promote respect for these rights and freedoms." Moreover, the definition of

human rights education is the teaching of history, theory, and law of human rights in schools and educational institutions as well as outreach to the general public. A comprehensive education in human rights not only provides knowledge about human rights and the mechanisms that protect them, but also imparts the skills needed to promote, defend and apply human rights in daily life. Human rights education fosters the attitudes and behaviors needed to uphold human rights for all members of society.

In 1993, the World Conference on Human Rights declared human rights education as “essential for the promotion and achievement of stable and harmonious relations among communities and for fostering mutual understanding, tolerance and peace”. In 1994, the General Assembly of the United Nations declared the UN Decade of Human Rights Education (1995-2004) and urged all UN members to promote “training dissemination and information aimed at the building of a universal culture of human rights”. As a result, governments have been putting more efforts into promoting HRE, mainly through state education programs. The aim is to learn about human rights, which means knowledge about human rights, what they are, and how they are protected. To learn through human rights, recognizing that the context and the way human rights learning is organized and imparted has to be consistent with human rights values (e.g. participation, freedom of thought and expression, etc.) and that in human rights education the process of learning is as important as the content of the learning. Learning about human rights by developing the skills, attitudes and values in learners that will enable them to apply human rights values in their lives and to take action (either alone or with others) in order to promote and defend human rights is equally important.

Article 26 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights states that everyone has a right to education and that:

Education shall be directed to the full development of the human personality and to the strengthening of respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms. It shall promote understanding, tolerance and friendship among nations, racial or religious groups, and shall further the activities of the United Nations for the maintenance of peace.

Education for democratic citizenship and human rights education are closely inter-related and mutually supportive. They differ in focus and scope rather than in goals and practices. As concluded, education for democratic citizenship focuses primarily on democratic rights and responsibilities and active participation, in relation to the civic, political, social, economic, legal and cultural spheres of society, while human rights education is concerned with the broader spectrum of human rights and fundamental freedoms in every aspect of people’s lives.

To return to Korczak’s work, the type of education for responsibility that he developed in the children’s home included the practice that everybody (both children and adults) was expected to take an active part in essential domestic

tasks. This enhanced the contacts and discussion between children and adults, and among the children themselves. They could practice expressing themselves and speaking up for themselves in daily activities. They wrote and created their own newspapers. This way they practiced working in democratic forms with mutual respect and adults had to learn to listen. And this is the definition of citizenship: the state of being vested with the rights, privileges and duties of a citizen, to be a member of a particular country and having rights because of it. The curriculum for citizenship education includes topics about politics and government, the legal system, multiculturalism, equal opportunities and the media. If we focus on the media, very soon it will be clear how important their role is in our societies, that it is now hard to imagine a life without television, emails, social media or blogs. Their role as a window to the world is still increasing. It is called the “fourth power” by analogy with the three traditional powers in a democracy (legislative, executive and judicial). Some people refer to the internet as the fifth power as it increasingly competes with traditional media and provides a new channel to organize civil action.

Global telecommunication networks serve not only to provide and receive information but have turned information into one of the most precious assets and the basis of the new global information economy. A human right most intimately related to the media is probably the right to freedom of opinion and expression. Freedom of expression, as upheld in human rights instruments, covers the right to receive or impart information, the right to silence, the right to form your own opinions. This freedom is also critical to communities and entire societies in order to progress, to realize equality, democracy and self-governance. Governments have always tried to exercise some control over the media and access the media in order to influence the masses and gain their support. A highly controlled media, however, steals from people social awareness, knowledge of global events, reliable analysis, as well as information about the state of the economy and political developments. The right to information – or the right to know – entails that the general public should be able to participate in a world of information and to know what is going on in their community. Seeking and receiving information constitutes a human right. As it is said by the council of Europe, “The power of the media can be misused, especially in a context of strong media concentration, to the detriment of pluralism and democracy”. In a nutshell, access to information is basic to the democratic way of life.

The media, information and communication technology play a central role in the lives of the youth today and are among the main factors that have shaped the current generation of young people. Children today can be considered digital natives: they grow up in an environment where technologies are a part of everyday life and they learn to use digital devices before they can walk or speak. One answer to these issues is to educate people to become more critical and sophisticated media users and communicators. Media education aims at making all citizens, particularly young people, aware of the power of the media, and

making them able to distinguish between good and poor quality information, open-minded and hateful messages. Media education can help audiences to learn to be selective rather than vulnerable to advertising, and to maintain their online safety and an adequate level of privacy. As defined by Oxford Dictionaries the post-truth phenomenon “is relating to or denoting circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than emotion and personal belief”. That’s why the term ‘Post-Truth’ was the 2016 Oxford Dictionaries word of the year. This definition combined with the fact that European youngsters of 12-17 years old spend 9.1 hours a week on the Internet as opposed to 11.4 hours spent by people 18 and older, not counting professional or academic use, is an reason why media education is so important.

Korczak was just the beginning. The first step. In the spirit of his work, the Convention emphasizes that children have a right to learn information appropriate for their age. Just like other citizens, they have the right to be informed about their situations, options and the consequences of their actions. The mass media could do more in this field. A minimum is that they can avoid stereotyping children and adolescents in ways that promote prejudices about their views and behaviors, whether for commercial or other reasons. Few governments have taken public media services for children seriously. There should be programs to improve children’s access to relevant information designed and adjusted for different age groups. Few (if any) governments have made an effort to involve children in the planning or production of media programs. Proposed solutions are, for example, trained journalists who are sensitive to the daily lives and special needs of children, and taking into consideration the risk of exploitation and abuse or having children take part in opinion polls and reportage is another way the media can make the voices of children heard. Children’s magazines have also played a role. Children journalists have been effective as reporters and interviewers, helping to make children’s views known. These developments, however, have also increased the risk of widening even further the gaps between included and excluded children. Moreover, the internet deserves careful attention and should be used as an instrument for enhancing children’s participation and their rights to have a voice in modern society.

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