

Good practice

What does a wartime Pole doctor, who went to his death with Jewish children, have to say to professionals who work with young people today? **Joop Berding** says that Janusz Korczak's example is not only in his martyrdom

Among the thousands of Jews that were moved from the ghetto of Warsaw on 6 August 1942 to the train station and then directly to the gas chambers of Treblinka were some men and women and around 200 children, orphans from Dom Sierot (House of the Orphans). One man, a doctor Janusz Korczak, led the way, one child on his arm, another hand-in-hand. Twice a Nazi official offered him personal freedom, but twice he refused. His calling was to stay with his children and, with them, perish in the Shoah.

Korczak became a martyr and a legend. We can also look beyond that to discover one of the finest and sincerest educators of all times, a man who was ahead of his time. From 1912, he practised his philosophy of the rights of, and respect for the children in his orphanage. He wanted every boy and girl, no matter what his or her social background or differences, to be a happy and constructive citizen. He longed for a society based upon justice and righteousness, and he thought it was high time to put it into practice in education.

When I came to know Korczak through his many books, I was confronted with a completely new way of looking at education, educators and children. He upset me because he mainly posed questions about what I did as an educational counsellor but gave no theoretical or definitive answers. He said that if you want to be an educator, you have to realise that "all tears are salty". By this he meant that not only adults, but children also have their deepest sorrows, and occurrences which depress them. Korczak asked educators to step down from their privileged position with their power to shape children according to their ideals. Children have a right to be who they are, Korczak said, and he practiced this pedagogy of difference everyday<sup>1</sup>. Teachers I work with ask pressing questions: how can I relate to every child, to all these different children that together make up my group or class? How can I avoid being the "boss"? How can I realise democratic principles within my school? Korczak's work may date from decades ago but it is up to date. For Korczak "invited" children and youngsters to participate in the community of the orphanage. He divided all the daily tasks, with children eager to perform them. He installed a parliament of children, and attached a school to the orphanage that was based upon responsibility and participation of the pupils. He wrote a book of law to regulate the community in a just way, and asked a changing group of children to judge whether justice was indeed realised.<sup>2</sup>

Mutual respect between adults and children was one of the core concepts of his views. Today we all talk about "respect" but is it more than just noting the differences between children? That's not respect, but disinterested tolerance. Respect means actively constructing opportunities for everyone to contribute to the processes of learning and development in the group. This must be based on sound and empathetic observation by the educator or teachers, listening to and looking at children to find out what their motives are, what steps they take on the path of development, and guiding them on their path. It also demands an open attitude and honesty towards one-self as an educator and one's own prejudices. Does one really see a child as she is?

Many classes are still organized in authoritarian ways. This is not a favourable condition for educating children for democratic citizenship. Korczak's concept of participation might look like a participative group of eight to 12 year-olds whom I visited. They were having a meeting. They discussed some problems that had arisen. One of these was that some children left their empty food plates and cans among the work materials. This caused inconvenience and fuss. The chair, one of the pupils, asked the others to come up with ideas on how to tackle this problem. They were written on a sheet and discussed and finally one was chosen. They decided to have a weekly cleaning duo to do the cleaning up, but only after everyone had put their own mess in a central place. This was noted in the proceedings. Every member of the group supported this. The educator did not have to intervene; she did not have to "instruct" the children what to do. Her job simply was to create conditions - psychological, social - that help build this little community.

I recognise now when I am too much an "instructor" and too much of a guiding hand. I am more empathetic toward the daily struggles of teachers and group leaders.<sup>3</sup> It can be a tremendously difficult job. However, if we try to see education as a partnership and not as a power relationship, it appears in a different light. It can only proceed and succeed if children are seen as partners and participants, and not as objects. This calls for belief and trust in children, and for an open eye, ear and heart for what motivates and occupies them. Korczak was way ahead of his time. It is time for us to catch up with him.

Joop Berding is an educational counsellor with the CED-Group in Rotterdam.

### References

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- 2 Korczak, J. (1967/1929). How to love a child. In M Wolins (editor), *Se/ected works of Janusz Korczak* (pp. 81-462). Washington, DC National Science Foundation.
- 3 Berding, JW.A. (2004), Janusz Korczak -What it means to be an educator, *Encounter Education for Meaning and Socia/ Justice* 18(4), pp. 11-16