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„Bobo” in Today’s Kindergarten: Korczak’s Practice in Early Childhood Education

Many of Janusz Korczak’s central pedagogical ideas are treated superficially as a patchwork of practices and quotes. This is not a phenomenon reserved for Korczak, a disconnect between philosophy, theory and practice permeates contemporary education in general. The key to this workshop is participation, exploring together, contemporary ideas about play, risk, nature and child rights.

Since children attending Korczak’s orphanage were aged 7 to 14 years, it is a common mistake that his ideas do not apply to early childhood, not to babies and children before school age. This session demonstrates that Korczak meant his ideas for all children, with examples presented from ‘Korczak’s Kindergarten’ which began operation in the late 1920’s. Exploring evidence directly from some of Korczak’s lesser known texts with specific reference to the lives of very young children, highlights the lack of interest or promotion of these publications and continues to reflect the low status of young children generally. Similarly, there is often an educational hierarchy in societies which places university as more important than high school, which sits above primary school, leaving preschool, child care and nursery at the bottom of the list. By viewing power through a critical lens, a very different picture of rights in relationships emerges demonstrating how respect looks without setting age limits.

Korczak is often labelled within the New Education movement with Dewey, Steiner and Montessori (Wołoszyn, 1997, p34; Valeeva, 2013, p88; Kirchner, 2013, p180; Silverman, 2017, p3). Examining why other educators are ‘known’ while Korczak is ‘forgotten’ explores symptoms of power², negativity, fear and stereotypes. Aiming for a better understanding of the ‘historically situated’ Korczak, makes use of a snapshot in time, prior to World War I. Once sympathy and his image of a ‘a kind old man’ are stripped back, there is a clearer investigation of the social institutions and influences guiding him as a younger man, for seeking out the determinants behind Korczak’s agency. For example, Montessori and Korczak are often seen as having similar progressive ideas as members of ‘New Education’. However, this causes Korczak to be understood through contemporary knowledge of Montessori education. By separating the layers, it can be revealed that at one point in time,

Montessori and Korczak represented opposing sides of the debate on the degenerate child. It is sometimes asked why the two famous educators, both doctors, never met? This becomes clearer upon seeing each of their early writing on the degeneracy debate. The question is no longer understood as why Montessori did not meet Korczak, but in reverse, why would Korczak meet with Montessori?

A great deal of what is called Montessori now, has been distilled via the American Montessori movement since the 1950s (Hinitz, 2013, p182). This is symptomatic of taking practices without seriously considering the philosophy which underpins them and has resulted in a composite version. Studies such as Giardello (2016) offer superficial explanations of Montessori's motivations and fail to include her book, *Pedagogical Anthropology* (1913). This book serves to historically situate Montessori, as she dedicates it to her influences and mentors, Cesare Lombroso and Sergi, the main proponents of the dominant 'criminal man' theory of the time. Montessori's anthropological method aims to eliminate what she describes as a hereditary atavistic tendency in order to '*better the race*' (Keatinge, 1914). She describes the book as her opus, containing anthropometric information and various facts on the inferiority of groups of people. Here it needs to be stressed that Montessori was not alone in working within the model of Lombroso's criminology. This paradigm pervaded Western Europe and North America for decades (Pick, 1996, p144).

On the other hand, Korczak's early response to the debate was not pedagogical, for example, with his satirical article dedicated to degeneracy ('Zwyrodnienie', 1904/1994, p9-10). He asserts his viewpoint rapidly, as he mocks journalists writing that the '*burning issue of the evil that lurks in the deterioration of the urban proletariat*' is mainly in their imagination. Furthermore, Korczak recommends the academic texts of Dallemagne (a French opponent of Lombroso) and explains that the pathological etiology of criminology is very complex, with elements of both environmental (climate, soil, hunger, religious, political and moral shocks, law and industry) and individual (disease, alcoholism, heredity and education) at play (*ibid*).

The parallel is drawn that both Montessori and Korczak were medically trained doctors who became educators. However, Montessori was a positivist with a philanthropic calling. She advocated experimental psychology as a starting point for '*the search for truth*' (Montessori, 1912/2008, p 44) whilst guided '*by the deep respect she felt for their [children's] misfortune*' (*ibid*, p48). The material nature of the institutions these educators established also presents the individual and collective beliefs and worldviews, through their

practices, norms and rules (Little, 2014). Both used observation, but Montessori demonstrated rigidity in her thinking and was convinced of the objectivity of her methods. For her, the trained teacher must be a passive observer of '*natural phenomena*' ready to intervene in matters of evil. These '*evil acts*' she described as feet up on tables, fingers in noses or the dawning of '*expressions of violence*' on faces of children prone to pushing (*ibid*, p71-80).

Korczak's medical experience differed substantially to the research and clinical environments of Montessori. Key to his medical work were prognosis skills gained from home visiting and in the field as an army doctor (Falkowska, 1989). Far from objective observation, Korczak gathered data whilst acknowledging the subjectivity of both the patient and the doctor in searching towards the real causes of illness. Korczak (1925/26, p396) instructs the teacher to mirror the ethics of a doctor who treats the criminal;

"...give the child all the air, sun, all the kindness that is his right, irrespective of his doing what is right or what is wrong, unrelated to his virtues and vices."

Montessori (1912/2008, p62) advised the teacher to be a model of high culture for '*almost savage people*' whilst affording no opportunity for vice. Whereas, Korczak (1920) held no such pretences as he reminds the reader of "*perverts who use refined speech and heroes of virtue with foul tongues*" and those criminals who always '*stop short of the prison gate*'. (Korczak in Wolins, 1967, p367). Instead he championed the rebellious child's resourcefulness and resilience as characteristics required in societal transformation¹. Therefore, it is difficult to use words such as 'criminal' or badly behaved and expect it has the same meaning (concept) for both educators.

Montessori's (1912/2008, p94) image of the child is one born helpless and in social bondage, thus her educational practices are liberating and aimed at revealing '*the truth of child nature*'. She evokes the '*noble savage*', that man existing in a pure state would be ignorant of evil and incapable of aggression. Her concept of development is not age restricted but rather related to stages of the child traversing the primitive man's evolutionary path to civilisation (*ibid*, p118). In leading the child to a social life, she states Rousseau-ian aims to retain their essence described as gentleness '*so absolute, so sweet*' (*ibid*, p94). For Korczak,

¹ Korczak's view is similar to Umberto Eco's much later work 'In Defence of Franti' which defends the character of the 'wicked' boy, Franti portrayed as the villain in De Amici's best seller, Cuore.

the child is no innocent but a philosopher and poet deserving of respect, moving in spaces difficult for adults to access and lacking in experience as the ‘*newly arrived foreigner*’;

“The child is not stupid. There are no more fools amongst them than among adults. Draped in the judicial robes of age, how often we impose silly, uncritical, impractical rules. Sometimes the wise child stops short in irritated amazement when confronted with aggressive, insecure, offensive stupidity.”

(Korczak, 1929/2012, p28)

Most people associate Korczak with the orphanages so therefore consider his work as being with older children aged mainly 7-14 years. Thus, it is often difficult to consider how his ideas are applicable to younger children because much of the focus is on dialogue and the self-governed institutions but Korczak was writing about all children and especially the youngest.

Looking chronologically at his experiences and career activities;²

- as a doctor specialising as a paediatrician in a children’s hospital and outpatient’s clinic. His studies from 1905-1912 took him to Berlin and Paris where he was researching infant nutrition and disease and the high mortality rate of children under 5 years. From 1905, he was also in private practice and home visiting families whilst also providing advice on raising children;
- as a pedagogue, his early educational work began by giving lessons and tutoring very young children while still in high school and into his university studies. It was common for wealthy families to have tutors or a governess for home schooling prior to sending their children off to school. Later, he extended his practice as a counsellor at summer camps.
- as a psychological-observer within a Montessori preschool while stationed as an army doctor in Kiev
- as a university lecturer, he delivered lectures and seminars for nurses and kindergarten teachers. These teachers were called *froebianki* as they were trained in the Froebel kindergarten approach, which was heavily influenced by Pestalozzi.
- as a media personality, he regularly featured in articles on preschool and early childhood particularly during the 1920s and 1930s. His children’s newspaper, “*Mały*

² Information sourced with assistance from M. Ciesielska, Korczakianum - Museum of Warsaw, 02/2012

Przegląd (Little Review) featured a column 'Kącik najmłodszych' (Little Corner for the Youngest). During 1934-36, his radio show included a segment 'Audycje dla młodszych dzieci' (Broadcast for younger children) with accompanying text published in "Antena".

- as a writer, Korczak heavily promoted books for very young children with his first published as early as 1902 which unfortunately has been lost. He encouraged reading and storytelling and published short texts in 1901-02 in "Wieczorach Rodzinnych" (Family Evenings). Young children also feature within his well-known publications - *Jak Kochać Dziecko* (How to Love a Child), *Dziecko w rodzinie* (The Child in the Family), *Bobo* and *Momenty Wychowawcze* (Educational Moments) amongst others.

Even before the war, Korczak was planning to write a volume on child development and thinking about how to include younger children in his orphanage. From the mid-1920s a kindergarten was planned in the Children's Home and finally achieved at the summer camp site, Różycka, (Little Rose) operating from 1928 to 1933. A kindergarten was also opened in Nasz Dom from 1928 (at first only for boarders, from 1934 it was open to the public) and conducted sociometric research on early childhood issues such as sleep, bed wetting, onanism and language development. In Nasz Dom between 1932-34, there was an experimental school for about 20 children with 2 teachers. It did not use bells but allowed free movement of the children within the big hall 'sala' classroom and eventually beyond. The hall where classes were held had 11 tables with a changeable layout and this was set by the child duty monitors without permanent seat places. It also included a resting corner with mats, blankets and pillows. Outside of the main classroom, there were various spaces – a quiet room, a loud room for movement and activity and a workshop which included sheet metal work. Lessons included reading, arithmetic cards, singing and arts, crafts and workshop. Every Thursday there were excursions related to the interests of the children, for example, *How are bread rolls made?* and *What is it like to work as a tram driver?*

This range of experience reminds us that when reading Korczak's work to remember that he is writing about ALL children. This is particularly evident in his book, *Bobo* (1914) which can be considered his infant study;

"The infant explores his hands. Straightens, shifts from the left to the right, brings closer and moves away, clenches fingers into a fist, talking to them and waits for a response, with the right grabs his left hand and pulls, takes the rattle and looks at the

curious altered image of the hand, transfers it from one to the other, examines it in his mouth, immediately takes it out and looks slowly, carefully.”

Korczak does not delineate between older and younger children as his philosophical ideas do not change even if the methods do. It is another reason why he did not advocate closed methods like Montessori but learning from the children as to what is appropriate for them. Korczak is saying the young child is a researcher, a scientist, a scholar and is learning all the time, much more than we are right now. This is hard work, it is difficult and needs to be taken seriously, just as seriously as you or I would expect for our work.

“The child is not playing: this tires the eyes terribly and takes considerable effort of will to understand. The baby is a scholar in the laboratory, thinking up issues of the highest importance, which slip in and out of his understanding.”

In a recent publication on Korczak’s pedagogy, Silverman (2017) describes *Bobo* as a work on the developmental stages of a baby which is incorrect. A developmental perspective tends to suggest something was less and moves to something more and better. This is not a view held by Korczak but rather a psychological lens applied by Silverman in his interpretation. In his book, Silverman edited out the above paragraph as unimportant whilst he used *Bobo* symbolically to explain Korczak’s worldview, hence once again ignoring the baby.

Returning to Korczak’s text;

“The aunt leans over the pram – her eyes are met with the serious gaze of Bobo. A beautiful baby, the aunt says to the mother, she has your mouth and father’s eyes. She leans a little further, kisses Bobo. Bobo is startled with fright. The Aunt is embarrassed by the kiss and by the fear it caused in the baby. Poor little one, says aunt, your mind is still asleep.

Bobo’s mind asleep? Asleep? Not conscious?

There is not a human mind at any stage of life that is as consciously alert as Bobo’s at this moment. If the human mind was always so unconscious, its thoughts would soar and the universe would fear losing its secrets.”

Not only is the baby not respected as a person, Korczak rejects many adult centred psychological concepts that are used to explain a baby’s behaviours as a deficit. We turn our

own mistakes around and use them as evidence that a young child is not yet fully developed and not rational. Korczak's explanation is almost the opposite, that there is never a time in human life quite like infancy and early childhood. The infant is experiencing amazing and rapid growth which is mostly invisible, changing so fast that he is already different today than yesterday and adults are struggling to keep up. More than 100 years ago, Korczak was predicting what neuroscience is now saying, that the baby is more complicated than the most fantastic machine we could ever imagine. Within a baby's brain, if we look at a tiny piece the size of a grain of rice, it contains 10,000 nerve cells so extrapolate to how many grains of rice there are across the whole brain. Now in that tiny grain of rice, each cell can make between 1 and 10,000 connections with other nerve cells so that ends up around 1 trillion connections. More than stars in the sky! This neural network is developing fast so that by the time a child is 5 years old they have around twice as many connections than an adult. Korczak also explains to us that in a very short period of time the baby might still be weak physically but takes advantage of the whole of human evolution to overtake even the most intelligent of the animals. So why as the child grows does the neural network shrink? The brain is losing some of those connections – and this is due to experience, the connections that are used become the ones that are needed so those are the ones that are kept – use it or lose it. We can call the effects of these experiences by another name, that of 'learning'. All experiences whether positive or negative, good or bad will have an impact on the brain's development. As Korczak writes in the Introduction to reports of the 'Aid for Orphans' Society (1927);

"Growth is difficult - the child's work and first responsibility and right."

According to Janusz Korczak every child is an unrepeatably and unique individual and just like every person – has their strengths and weaknesses (Korczak, 1958, s. 43-44).

'Children don't become human beings, they already are'.

For the infant, there is the reality of physical vulnerability and biological maturation. The early twentieth century had seen rapid advancement of medical knowledge and the concern for high number of infant deaths had transformed infancy and early childhood by stressing hygienic and quiet environments. This is what Korczak's staff encountered when they visited the local foundling orphanage. It is important to make this distinction from Korczak's orphanage (*Dom Sierot*) where the children often had a living parent or extended family but were placed in the orphanage due to difficult circumstances due to poverty or illness resulting in the family unable to care for them. Some children even went home on the weekend which

is why his orphanage can be considered as a boarding school of sorts. The foundlings on the other hand had a very different social status as these were abandoned children - unwanted. The view was that a 'good' baby is easier to adopt, that is one who is clean, does not cry and sleeps well. To promote health and safety and develop a passive temperament, these babies and toddlers were raised in a very sterile environment where infancy was treated as an illness. The children were kept in their cots for prolonged periods to minimize activity, unable to see out of the windows and rarely heard anyone speak. These conditions seem difficult to comprehend but were to be found in North America up until the 1960s and similar policies led to the appalling conditions in Romanian orphanages up until the 1990s. However, for the young staff coming from Korczak's house this was shocking. One teacher described that this lack of stimulation had the children lifting her skirt trying to find coloured socks, desperately looking for colour. Of course, this environment subdued the children within the foundling orphanage but rarely succeeded in its aims externally. Once adopted, the new parents could not cope with the child in a normal home environment resulting in many foundlings returned to institutional care. This led to a new project to develop a kindergarten home for the children aged 4 to 6 years of age leaving the foundling orphanage. It was approved by Korczak and he chose the staff to run it although he doubted their capacity for success due to the difficult behaviours exhibited by the children. It was decided that there would be benefits from being in the countryside at the summer camp, Różycka. The site was a total of 10 acres (4 hectares) fenced all the way around with one main gate and entry via a long driveway lined with apple trees and sunflowers. There was even a little forest and Korczak remarked that the only thing they were missing was water, either a lake or a river, and for that they had to travel. Różycka was already in operation for older children who came for summer camp, winter recovery and other boarding activities. It had a workshop, laundry with a farm, forest and garden to supply its own food and stables for the horses which were needed for transport and farm work. The boarding house for the kindergarten children was built last.

"The child needs movement, air, sunlight – agreed, but something else, too. To see into the distance, a feeling of freedom – the open window. [...] reaching to achieve the highest thoughts in a way that does the least harm to human rights."

[The Open Window, Special School, 1925/26]

What was it like in those early days with 20 or so 4-year olds coming from the foundling orphanage to the kindergarten? One teacher described it like letting wild horses out

of the stable. Anyone who has ever worked with horses knows when like this, they are dangerous to themselves and to others. The approach taken is at complete odds to contemporary practice with children such as these. Generally, we try to restrain them, hug them, we try to remove distractions, things and people, put them in special spaces, perhaps therapy with simple activities and make them wait in cars and waiting rooms for psychologists and speech therapists and so on. I am not suggesting this is wrong but reflecting that each one closes the window slightly with the child losing their sense of freedom. When the children arrived at the kindergarten, there were only a couple of rules. Any child could leave the kindergarten, as long as they had told someone that they were going, were not to leave the outside fence (10 acres) and could visit people who were working, but not annoy them. The older school children would stand guard at the gate to discourage the little ones from leaving and this practice still happens at the Korczakowo summer camp. Thus, animals and the general activities of the farm and house were important aspects of life for the children. Even in the city orphanage the children had a garden and kept rabbits and guinea pigs as pets. It was this involvement in “work” that was emphasized in Korczak interpretation during communist times overshadowing his emphasis on play, caring and social relations. At the kindergarten, the important outdoor features were swings, climbing equipment and the sandpit. Now it has sometimes been said that Korczak did not understand play and this is usually accompanied by a quote from him that children of all ages needed to have outside play to get out excess energy. This can be taken as a defence of much older children having the chance to play, as he had a rule in the Children’s Homes that all the school children, before they did anything else, before homework or chores or duties, had to have a half hour of play. However, it is oversimplification to consider contemporary notions of play as better than theirs.

This is demonstrated by the case of young Ida Merżan, one of Korczak’s former staff members. As a teenager, Ida arrived in Warsaw from a small village to go to university. She first remembers meeting Korczak at lectures in education and child studies, and was encouraged by friends to apply to the Bursa at the orphanage as a student teacher. In her successful application, she wrote that she should be chosen because although she had very little experience, she was young and valued play with the children. Many years later she admitted being ashamed of that statement having learnt that facilitating children’s play had little to do with age and more to do with attitude. However, the value of play that she learnt from Korczak, the other teachers and especially the children stayed throughout her teaching

and writing career. In 1967, she was advocating that parents and teachers understand the child's right to play as stated in the Declaration.

It is useful to consider that laws are often written down long after they already exist within society. By the time Merżan is writing, the right to play was a cultural trend in Poland, one which could be considered a social norm especially for early childhood. To put it into context, Korczak's kindergarten teachers had themselves been taught by kindergarten teachers and especially popular was Froebel's approach which was influenced by Pestalozzi (one of Korczak's heroes). Froebel's kindergarten movement was a century old when Korczak was writing so there was perhaps not much to suggest that it needed his defending. I propose that another reason for Korczak's disinterest in Montessori was that he did not see what her method offered compared to what was already available through Froebel's kindergartens. In contemporary preschool programs where children are playing with blocks, with sand, water or clay, or cutting their own fruit or planting vegetables in the garden, this is Froebelian kindergarten practice. Inside Korczak's kindergarten, we would expect many familiar aspects – wooden blocks, musical instruments, a library, child sized furniture but also plants and flowers, tablecloths and curtains. It was very much a homey classroom far from the hospital image of the foundling orphanage. Although Korczak has a fondness for blocks, it is interesting that he writes about the child's special relationship with her doll. This relates well with one of Froebel's quotes:

“Play is the highest expression of human development in childhood, for it alone is the free expression of what is in a child's soul.”

Play with dolls was considered important for both boys and girls in the kindergarten. Anticipating resistance from other teachers and parents regarding this, Ida recommends setting it up as 'doll's hospital' where dolls could be used in doctor play. She included a repair workshop and even making furniture and clothes, as sewing and tailoring were considered an appropriate skill activity for both the boys and girls unlike later perceptions. The teachers brought these features with them for running the kindergarten with the idea that play can be all things in education, something Ida Merżan (1967) later called holistic or comprehensive development.

“The child must be guaranteed the conditions for play... for holistic development of the child...play provides new knowledge, acquisition of physical and social skills, develops aesthetics...”

To conclude we return to 'Bobo' and reflect on a unique example of Korczak-ian practice and concept of citizenship with short case studies presented by Merzan (1967);

"The backyard is a great place to observe both children and their playmates, as well as parents who direct their activity in play, despite them thinking their children are playing independently. [...]"

In the shade stands a baby pram. Not too far, more in the sunshine, a second pram. Both 'citizens' are the same age.

Janek is dressed in a (one-sie) sleepsuit and holds in his hand a coloured rattle, which is tied by a ribbon to the pram. Older children, who come by, peer into the pram, and if they notice that the rattle has fallen out of the little one's hands, they give it back to him. Janek examines his hands or pulls his feet to his mouth. It is difficult work. And it is not always successful. However, this does not discourage him and he returns to his training. This is his preliminary physical training and first play, but also a training of his will. He really wants to get those feet into his mouth. Later he looks over his fingers, turns his hands, then turns them in every direction. He is so pleased that he smiles to himself. It is pleasant to lay like this. He also smiles at the children, those that look into the pram. It shows that he does recognise them. They are his first social contacts.

But conditions for development are different for Paul, although he lays in an identical pram. His arms and legs he has tightly wrapped by a warm blanket, which stops his movement. So, he lays only looking at the little bears tied to his pram. He cannot move his legs, his arms either. He is a sensitive child and worried about his health, his mother tucks his arms back under the covers. Toys get dirty when they fall on the ground so she has removed anything unnecessary. He lacks the opportunities for movement like his colleague Janek and so frequently has colds. She prefers other children not to come towards little Paul. They may wake him or bring some sort of infection. Sometimes she checks on him if he has uncovered himself while sleeping, and she goes back to sitting on the park bench."

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