

# When are People Considered “Ahead of Their Time”? Based on the Case Study of Janusz Korczak

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## Abstract

Very rarely is one considered ahead of his/her time. Janusz Korczak has been described by so many as being such a person. His criticism of the educational system in his time served as a motivational force for his innovative pedagogy. His beliefs, techniques and methods have been echoed by experts in special education as well as in gifted education a few decades after his lifetime. The analysis of Korczak’s relevant criticism, as well as his unique ideas is chosen as a prototype for the question raised in the title. A short analysis of the work of Feurstein and Renzulli is provided, both of whom reflect the main principles of Korczak.

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**Keywords:** Criticism; innovative pedagogy; liberal education; in-formal education; democratic school.

People are different from each other in their abilities, achievements and aspirations. People are categorized, according to various norms, as average, below average and above it, as talented, gifted and very rarely as geniuses. But even more rarely will the title “ahead of his / her time” be attached to somebody. Since that title has been attached nowadays by so many to Janusz Korczak, the analysis of the ideals in education developed from his pedagogy could serve as a prototype for that issue.

## Part one: Janusz Korczak as a prototype

### a. Biography

Janusz Korczak, the pen name of Henryk Goldzmit, was born in Warsaw, Poland, on July 22, 1878 (Efron, 2008). From a very early age, he developed sensitivity toward the sufferings of impoverished children, who, as he felt, suffered the most from the outcomes of inequalities. At the age of 33, a literary success and established as a pediatrician, he left his clinical practice and accepted the position of director of an orphanage for Jewish children, “Children’s Home”, and several years later “ Our Home” for Christian children. Both institutions operated according to his unique educational methods. For more than 30 years, Korczak, who never had a family of his own, had dedicated his life to disadvantaged children aged 7-14 from Warsaw’s poor neighborhoods. He lived with them, worked with them, taught them, and learned from them. During those years Korczak felt that the responsibility for cultivating their moral growth lay with him and the institutions’ educators, until he and the 200 Jewish children, together with the whole staff, were sent to their death during the 2<sup>nd</sup> World War on August 7, 1942. (Although he was offered his freedom, he refused to abandon his group of children, and marched with them in their last journey).

Korczak’s life story and pedagogy were intertwined. At the heart of Korczak’s pedagogical vision was the belief that children are humanity’s only hope and that “mending the world means mending education” (Efron,2008).

## **b. Korczak's criticism of education**

Korczak was a vigorous critic of the schools in general (Kahana 1986), a few decades before that same criticism started to echo around the world. He thought that schools did not arouse children's interest in learning, they did not nurture the goodness and honesty of each child, neither did they try to prevent careerism, and minor ambitions. A different program should be planned for the development of their intellect and self-confidence.

Korczak thought that grades or report cards could not achieve the real goal of imparting knowledge for its own sake.

Korczak thought that there was a gap between schools and "real life". Furthermore, there was no distinction between the material that should be remembered and the one that could be retrieved from books, (Efron, 2005)

Moreover, he believed that schools ignored the deep needs of children and the difficulties and obstacles that they faced. The tough rules that schools impose, the constant criticism towards the students and disbelief in them should be replaced by a deeper belief in the children's abilities. Its significance surpasses that of love. This notion could be expressed in inviting them to be involved in establishing the procedures of the school (Kahana, 1986).

The teacher should not try to mold the character of his students according to his own opinion or taste, and thus, destroy the uniqueness of each of them. This kind of education was considered by Korczak as an act of taming.

About fifty years after his time a similar criticism was published in a document, written by students in Montgomery County in the United States under the title "Wanted Humanistic Education." The students complained that schools were based on fear; they empowered dishonesty; ruined the pleasure of learning, and encouraged obedience to authority (Cohen, 1989).

A seventh grader Israeli boy wrote in a newspaper titled "Politics" an article titled "Only Puppets". He claimed that schools lacked adaptation to changing times. Since schools maintained fixed laws that lacked flexibility, they could be considered as closed institutions. They were dull and charmless places that inhabited generations upon generations of students who acted like robots, according to those unchangeable laws. Beyond all of that, he claimed that talent seemed to be the greatest enemy of teachers (Lapid, 1988).

Many radical educators from the fifties and sixties of the twentieth century echo Korczak's criticism. Postman, Goodman, Freire Kozol, Holt, Kohl and many others thought like Korczak (in the beginning of the twentieth century) that schools detach the children from real life, and strive for uniformity in an artificial surrounding. They prevent the nurturance of creativity, they miss relevancy for the children's lives and cause harm in many areas. As a result, children have lost their interest in learning, the ability to delve into a subject, at the same time they also lack commitment or joy resulting from naïve discoveries of what exist around them (Cohen, 1989).

## **c. Korczak's Unique Pedagogy**

Korczak believed that a better education depends on a different understanding of children. The child is a complete person, not a person in the making, but a person here and now. Childhood is an end in and of itself, and children are entitled to a fulfilling life. Korczak's ideas entered the first international Declaration of the Rights of the Child in Geneva in 1924 (Shner, 2015).

He was not only a theoretician like a few of his contemporaries in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, but also a "total" educator who combined both rich writings about education and pioneering practice (Efron, 2005). Korczak believed that the way to facilitate moral character was by evoking in the young a disposition for goodness, justice and truth that would vibrate throughout their lives. This could be achieved through living and engaging authentically with moral values. A genuine experience

of equity, democracy, and personal and community empowerment would endow the young with the skills and dispositions to strive to make these ideals ingrained in the society at large. (Efron, 2008)

Korczak understood that education was the tool necessary to equip the individual with the skills to create a new democratic society based on cooperation. In such a school cooperation, rather than competition would rule (Engel, 2008). His belief in a democratic, cooperative, moral world led Korczak to establish the procedure of mentoring, by which a senior child would become a mentor of a newcomer. The mentor's job was to guide his apprentice, and while doing it he would learn to recognize their difficulties and characteristics and would document them. He believed that education needed to develop the child's initiative, independence, individuality, and self-direction. Self-determination replaced obedience and dependence (Engel, 2013).

At the time when questions and the fog that accompanies the uncertainty of "I don't know" seemed as a torturous void, Korczak recognized the vibrant power of the question, as an enticement for research, for new thoughts and creative solutions. This idea has currently become very popular and relevant.

The educator should see his role as a mentor, whose goal is to nurture the student's thinking skills, and to confront him with the sources of knowledge, not authoritatively, but rather as guides for clarification and examination of his way.

Korczak is known and remembered for his utmost love and respect for children. He believed that the educator had to understand and accept the student as a unique individual. Only an educator, who dislikes thought, will be disappointed by differences and angered by variety.

Korczak believed that reflecting on one's own childhood uncertainties, inner struggles, and failures, enables the educator to see the world from the children's perspective, sense their feelings and thoughts, be sympathetic to their ethical conflicts, and forgive them for their mistakes.

Korczak's insight has been proven to be tremendously modern. He believed that education should not be understood as a technical process, where the act of learning involves only a total acceptance of what had been taught by the teacher. Education in a broad and integral sense should imply personal relationship. Only personal bonds between the teacher and his student would ensure the student's extensive development, and not just cognitive training and instruction (Boschki R, 2005).

Moreover, he claimed that the mystery and uniqueness that each child presents is guided by 3 questions: What was the child's past? Who is the child now? How can the educator assist the child to achieve his or her potential? This meant that in order to get a thorough knowledge of a child, the educator should make an effort to get the relevant data on the child from as many sources as possible.

The value of Korczak's work was never in the specific content of study, nor can it be reduced to a set of formulas, strategies or methods (Efron, 2008). He was skeptical of educational "recipes" and prescriptions. Korczak regarded education as an individual, creative, dynamic process, which is dependent on place, time, and environmental conditions (Engel 2013, p. 122).

Moreover, Korczak thought that creating a fixed educational philosophy or methodology would reduce life processes and dynamic relationships to theoretical schemes, and replace the constant and ongoing touch with real educational activity. Pedagogy, according to Korczak, is based on and grows from the slow experience of every educator (Cohen, 1989).

#### **d. Techniques Used in the Orphanages**

Korczak's unique pedagogy was associated with the notion of "children's democracy" that he implemented in both of his orphanages – as exemplified by a Children's Parliament, a Children's Court, and a Children's Newspaper, constituting altogether a rational children's community (Shner 2015). He stressed the significance of respecting each child's distinctive individuality, by attending to

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his natural order of development (Engel, 2013). This would mean, first of all, allowing each student to learn according to his own pace. The student's pace of learning and his level of achievements were believed to be determined basically by the student's cognitive ability. Yet, Korczak, long before Goleman, established the concept of Emotional intelligence, and pointed to the fact that besides the familiar I.Q there is another factor, not less important, but unfortunately ignored by schools, which he named "the intelligence of the heart, or the character".

Secondly, Korczak realized, a few decades before Gardner, (who established the theory of multiple intelligences), that children are different from each other in their channels of communication, and thus, the use of divergent teaching methods, seems crucial (Kahana, 1986).

As part of his goal to get to know each child as a whole, Korczak used the technique of sociogram, by which he got to know the social status of each of the children. The procedure of social evaluation was an ongoing process in the orphanages as a preparation to real life. This technique became a popular tool in guidance counseling a few decades later (Cohen, 1989).

According to Korczak the quality of knowledge is much more important than its quantity, and thus, it is preferable to get deeply involved in one subject (chosen by the student), than to touch many of them superficially. That notion has become one of the basic principles in gifted education.

Korczak, together with the other teachers in the orphanages lived in a real community with the children. They shared their meals and work, and came together for assemblies (in the Children's Parliament). In his days his "respect for the child" pedagogy was considered radical (Boschki, 2005, p.120).

Korczak took part in all the chores in the orphanages, and by doing so he served as a model for the rest of the staff. They had to "learn" to take part in every task, and also to tutor the children to perform any assignment needed in the kitchen, dining room, toilets, laundry, library, playroom, or even taking care of sick children. The message to everyone involved was that every chore had the same value (Dror, 2008). That idea was echoed a few decades later by Tannenbaum while searching for a definition for a gifted child, he stated that gifted is "one who shows consistently remarkable performance in any worthwhile line of human endeavor" (including non-academic domains). (Tannenbaum, 1983, p. 8).

The lists of assignments were prepared very often by the children on duty. The assignments would be summed up daily, and those summaries would serve as a basis for the discussion, held with the adults, raising ideas for possible improvements.

In addition to its being a home for the needy children, in 1923 the orphanage started to fulfill the function of a teaching college ("Bursa") for students who majored in education or psychology. The students could use the facilities of the orphanage in return for four hours of daily work. Korczak and Stefa, his partner, guided the young educators during their work in the orphanage. The method of integrating pedagogical learning with practical work is considered as one of Korczak's great educational innovations, which preceded the "practicum", used in every teaching college today. As a matter of fact, it was an implementation of the medical internship, used in the academic hospital, which Korczak had known so well from his medical experience. The use of case studies in teaching training, which is so common nowadays, is also considered as one of Korczak's innovations. The cases written by the teaching students, under Korczak's supervision, were analyzed, both personally and as a group exercise (Dror, 2008).

Moreover, the seeds to the NLP method (Neurological, Linguistic Programming) were also planted by Korczak, by using the modeling method, besides the personal experience, during the training period.

The distinction between "in-formal" and "non-formal" education is clear nowadays. In-formal education is an ongoing, lifetime process, where people learn from their everyday experiences, while

non formal education refers to educational activity that takes place outside the framework of formal education. Yet, for Korczak both of them were part of his unique pedagogy in the orphanages. The children learned from their experiences during their meetings with their peers and their mentors, as well as from the organized non formal institutions, in which all of them served in turns (Kahana, 1986).

Moreover, priority was given to field-trips rather than classroom learning, especially when studying geography or foreign languages. This is just one of numerous and varied educational experiences, that according to Korczak, would foster a rich and multifaceted personality (Aloni, 2013). It might be concluded that Korczak preferred learning from life experiences to learning from books (Cohen, 1989).

The staff members who moved to Israel, summarized Korczak's work, and using his model, developed similar educational methods in their institutions. During the last decades Democratic schools have been established in Israel, as well as throughout the world, where "Korczakian" tools are used (Dror, 2008).

During Korczak's visits to the communal settlements (Kibutz) in Israel, he was impressed by the "mixed kindergarten" approach. And since he assumed that mental ages, rather than chronological ones, should be the criteria for grouping classes, Korczak implemented this concept in his orphanages. Three decades later multi-age grouping was opened up in various non- formal frameworks in Israel, including some boarding schools. Since the end of the Fifties (of the twentieth century). This approach became customary also in formal educational frameworks, when classes were too small.

Korczak met the children at their level and patiently, forgivingly but determinedly, helped them to improve (Efron, 2008).

Many Israeli boarding schools have adapted Korczak's model of school life forty years later. Like him, they tried to teach the students the ability to examine every issue from various points of view. On one hand the educational, ideological view, and on the other hand the practical, economical view. That capability would serve the students in their future life when facing the need to examine complex situations (Dror, 2008).

## **Part two: A sample of Korczak's followers**

### **a. Special Education / Reuven Feuerstein**

Feuerstein and Korczak shared similar beliefs, and even though Feuerstein lived so many years after Korczak, he was still considered a revolutionist among his peers, the psychologists. During his whole career, he expressed his belief in cognitive modifiability (at any age, and in every condition), and in the responsibility of a skilled mediator to liberate the child's potential.

Feuerstein's educational experience resembled that of Korczak's. He also encountered children who suffered during World War II. Feuerstein served as a Director of Psychological Services of Youth Aliyah in Europe (Immigration for young people), a service that assigned prospective Jewish candidates for emigration from all over the European continent to various educational programs in Israel. In addition, young people came from different countries, where the dominant culture was different from the western one (Feuerstein, 1980). In the fifties of the previous century Feuerstein researched Moroccan, Jewish, and Berber children in collaboration with several members of the Geneva school. Upon their arrival, the children, were subjected to a series of tests, including IQ tests, assuming that they could predict what the child would be able to achieve or do in the future. Such a conventional practice was based on either of the two presumptions:

1. "Intelligence is a faculty that develops with little influence from experience".
2. The extent of the variation existing in the development-fostering quality of experience across cultures and social classes is quite minor. (Feuerstein, 1980, p. vii).

The poor results that most of the children achieved in those tests improved whenever Feuerstein interviewed them.

Based on that experience, Feuerstein started to question the current beliefs regarding the stability of intelligence. "What if intelligence was not a fixed attribute, measurable once and for all? What if intelligence could be taught?" (Feuerstein & Richelle 1979; 2002, p.10).

Influenced by Piaget on one hand and Vygotsky on the other hand, Feuerstein went one step further and created the theory of *Mediated Learning Experience* in which he assigned a major role to a human mediator. According to Feuerstein, all learning interactions can be divided into direct learning and mediated learning. Learning, mediated by a skilled human being, is indispensable for a child because the mediator assists in developing the child's prerequisites that then make direct learning effective.

Those two notions in his theory (the need for thinking prerequisites, and for a mediator to foster their development) played a significant role in Korczak's pedagogy as well, a few decades earlier. Korczak wanted the children to learn, yet, he believed that "beyond the skills and knowledge they would acquire, they should *learn* to think independently and to take charge of their own lives, thereby becoming contributing members of their democratic society (Engel, 2008).

The need for human mediation was implemented in the orphanages by training older children to mentor the children, who were new and those who faced social difficulties. The mentors were active partners in the process of education (Efron, 2008).

Feuerstein's theory of "Mediated Learning Experience" (MLE) consists of two complementary instruments - the diagnostic and the therapeutic. The diagnostic one – the Learning Potential Assessment Device (LPAD) is meant to assess the individual's potential, rather than to provide an inventory of what he has learned and of his current problem solving ability. The dynamic approach of the assessment process, involves testing in the act of learning and assessing the process of learning, thus specifying changes in cognitive strategies and styles. That information is then used as a guideline to what and how should be taught.

The therapeutic instrument – Instrumental Enrichment (IE), (Feuerstein et al. 1980) is aimed to correct deficient cognitive functions through systematic exercises, which include the creative part of implementation to everyday life. While treated individually, instruments would be selected according to the results of the LPAD (Feuerstein et al., 1979).

Unlike Feuerstein, Korczak did not leave (Cohen 1989) a fixed educational philosophy or methodology, but his general conduct echoes in Feuerstein's basic beliefs. (Dror, 2008) Inspired by his medical experience, Korczak saw the significance of constant overall assessment of every child, by which he could notice minute changes, and apply his treatment accordingly. In general, that was Feuerstein's aim in creating his two instruments.

Korczak, like Feuerstein, did stress the significance of meaningfulness in learning (Cohen, 1989) The teacher should do his best to convey his material in a way that it would attract the student, since learning should be an enjoyable process. Moreover, both believed that teaching should be individualized and adapted to the level of the student.

## **b. Gifted Education / Renzulli**

Renzulli, like his predecessor Korczak, believed that education is a tool to achieve two major goals– the individual one – fulfilling one's potential, and the social one – increasing society's reservoir of contributing people (Renzulli, 2012).

Renzulli, like Korczak and like Feuerstein (Korczak's other follower), criticized the absolute reliance on I.Q tests in the process of identification of ability, and in his case – identifying giftedness. He felt that giftedness develops from an integration of several characteristics. Starting with three - above average ability; task commitment and creativity (Renzulli and Reis, 1986) and moving

gradually to a longer list of characteristics. Like Feuerstein nowadays, and Korczak, who preceded him, Renzulli shows a great concern towards children from underprivileged families, refusing to rely on information that tells us what students already know, and how they compare with others, since those scores reflect the child's background rather than his true potential. Instead, Renzulli suggests the assessment of co-cognitive characteristics, or soft skills, such as interests, motivation, curiosity, planning skills, styles of learning and expression, empathy, creativity, and self-regulation. Those skills are assumed to predict potential contributions better than high scores on standardized tests (Renzulli, 2012).

Renzulli's Schoolwide Enrichment Model (Renzulli and Reis, 1985) consists of three stages: stage one is intended to extend the pool of potentially gifted children by exposing the children to varied enrichment experiences; the goal of stage two is to develop different skills needed for learning and conducting research; and stage three is intended to provide opportunities in which students can apply, under the supervision of a mentor, their interests, knowledge, creative ideas and task commitment to a self-selected problem or area of study, and then present it before an audience. This model integrates elements of identification and nurturance.

Principles of all of those stages were preceded in Korczak's orphanages. Due to his constant assessments and collection of data of the children's habits and conduct, Korczak could detect special talents and did his best together with Stefa, his assistant, to nurture those talents.

One of the children, who became a great painter, got the space and the needed equipment that enabled him to practice. Another child, who showed his interest in photography, got a camera, and became a photographer, and a third one, who expressed a superb musical talent, got a harmonica and turned to be one of the finest musicians in that instrument (Poznanski, 1982).

As mentioned earlier, Korczak tried to include varied enrichment experiences, mainly field trips, which gave him a chance to know the children from an additional perspective.

Communication skills were practiced in all the democratic institutions, especially in the children's newspaper, where the children expressed their opinions regularly.

## **Final words**

Korczak started his long revolutionary educational journey by clinging to the belief in the power of education to render changes in every individual, and thus, in the whole universe. In order to change the world to a better and moral place to live in, a lot of changes had to be established.

The example set by Korczak's educational praxis serves as an inspiring model of school life across the boundaries of time and place and touches our need to believe in education's responsibility to strive and struggle for a better world' even when it seems an unattainable goal (Efron 2008).

Throughout the article I have highlighted the most significant conducts and techniques he used in the orphanages, as well as the names of some of his followers. Korczak's ideas (and unfortunately, even his criticism) are still relevant to the current educational discourse and stimulate new insights into the role of the educator as a researcher and knowledge producer. Korczak's vision of educational research is considered as far sighted, and his educational thoughts – inspiring and enlightening (Efron, 2005).

The search for a better education, for more reliable measures of ability, and for better tools to nurture the human potential will probably never end, and from time to time the field of education (like any other field) will entitle a person, who lived a few decades earlier, and left significant contributions in the field, that continue to inspire the next generations, as a person who was "ahead of his/her time."

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