

Does School Reform Have Legs? The Flourishing of Janusz Korczak's Pedagogy in Modern Israel

by Liba H. Engel

With the arrival of the 21st century, a serious reappraisal of the school reforms from the previous century emerged (Ravitch 2000, Angus and Mirel 1999, Kliebard 2002). For the most part, these reappraisals reflected skepticism about many of the reforms that were characteristic of the "progressive era," and, here and there, pessimism about the extent to which fundamental change can be wrought in the ways schools work. As a result, the successes and failures of school reforms are understood only partially at best. One way of furthering an understanding of the phenomenon of school reform is to examine in a case study format the way in which a revolutionary school change was implemented not only in its original setting, but also in a totally different milieu many years later. Such a study offers clues as to why certain reforms fade quickly while others have a more lasting impact—that is, they have "legs."

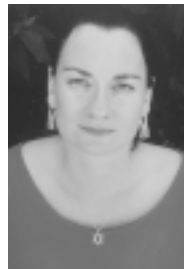
The radical pedagogical innovations that were undertaken by Janusz Korczak in Poland between the two World Wars are examined first. His basic ideas are outlined, and the central features of his pedagogy are described. Particular attention is paid to structural changes that were instituted.

In the second part of the article, the setting changes to a contemporary Israeli

school that has undertaken Korczak's reforms. Through extensive fieldwork, I try to answer whether the reform ideas developed originally in a different era and cultural setting have flourished many years later on a new soil. The extent to which Korczak's ideas survived is considered, with particular attention paid to the structural mechanisms that most likely led to their survival. Though I am sympathetic to Korczak's overall reforms, the main purpose of this study is not to extol them, but to illustrate how certain reforms can be instituted and sustained successfully.

JANUSZ KORCZAK'S PEDAGOGY

Janusz Korczak was born Henryk Goldszmit in Warsaw, Poland on 22 July 1878. Like many of his reform-minded contemporaries, he did not concentrate on ex-



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pressing a formal educational philosophy (Lifton 1997). Instead, he installed innovative organizational structures in his experimental schools as a way of promoting a new social vision. A physician, writer, and educator, he spent many of his adult years as the director of two orphanages in Warsaw. In *Orphans Home* (1912–1942) and *Our Home* (1919–1942), Korczak formulated and refined his unorthodox educational ideas. When the Nazis overran Poland at the outset of World War II, Korczak relocated his Jewish orphanage within the Warsaw Ghetto where he continued to direct the institution. Korczak is remembered for the final walk he took with his children on 6 August 1942—destination: the gas chambers of Treblinka.

Like other European school reformers, such as Maria Montessori and A. S. Neill, Korczak advocated educational experiences based on the child's natural order of development (Lifton 1997). These reformers turned to the children themselves as the pivotal points in school reform. The focus on the developmental principles guiding these reforms, however, has sometimes led to a gross underestimation of the social ideals that prompted them. Korczak and his European contemporaries brought new psychological insights that were not reflected in traditional schools. They also were inspired by a social vision that saw schools as the breeding grounds for a new democratic social order. Accordingly, they tried to replace traditional school structures with new forms of organization that would reflect the democracy they envisioned. Democracy would not simply be taught; it would be practiced in a school setting.

Toward this end, Korczak encouraged children to become actively engaged in their own schooling. Through authentic participation in the governance of the school, the child presumably would become socialized into democratic forms of

living. The attainment of his social ideals would be achieved not by direct instruction, such as courses in civics, but rather by creating a living democracy in a school setting. By implication, at least, socialization into democratic processes in a school setting ultimately would have a beneficial impact on the larger social order.

In this respect, Korczak was not very different from his illustrious American contemporary John Dewey. Dewey (1915), like Korczak, was “child centered,” a designation that fails to touch on the crucial social role he saw for his experimental schools. Dewey's Laboratory School at the University of Chicago and Korczak's Children's Republic (the name given to Korczak's pedagogical experiments) embodied an effort to build, in Dewey's words (1915, 18), a “miniature community, an embryonic society” where idealized social relations could be practiced and lived. Neill's Summerhill (1972), for example, also sought to create a lived democracy in a school setting by balancing the rights of the individual and community. While these reformers wanted the children in their schools to acquire skills and knowledge, they also wanted them to “learn” to think independently, take charge of their own lives, and become contributing members of their society.

This could have been a risky strategy, with students neglecting or abusing the responsibility they were accorded. That's why reformers like Korczak, Montessori, and Neill (Engel 1999) sought to create alternative authority structures they hoped would be more effective than traditional authority structures. At the same time, these alternative authority structures were designed to reflect desirable democratic practices. Though teachers and other school personnel participated in these new mechanisms of control, much of the authority was transferred to the students themselves.

KORCZAK'S EXPERIMENTAL SCHOOLS

The students in Korczak's schools were not drawn from a social elite (Lifton 1997). The children were orphans or impoverished children of Polish workers. They were admitted at the age of seven and stayed until the completion of seventh grade. Active participation in the schools' political and judicial structure was crucial to the children's social development and served to initiate children into democratic processes. From an early age, children were engaged in activities such as creating the Code of the Court of Peers, participating in the judicial proceedings of the Court of Peers and Children's Parliament, engaging in various kinds of work, and publishing the school newspaper. Self-rule and peer arbitration, according to Korczak (1967a), provided children with opportunities to learn the rudiments of democratic processes through direct participation.

Korczak and the children together established the rules governing the internal life of Children's Republic. Turning over significant responsibility to the children themselves necessarily meant relinquishing some control by adults, but such student activities were necessary, as Korczak saw it, as a kind of rehearsal for participation in the democratic social order that he envisioned.

Central to the governing structure was the Children's Parliament. It embraced many of the educational and ethical issues vital to the operation of the school and was composed of 20 elected deputies (Korczak 1967a). Staff and children were entitled to one vote each, but candidacy was restricted to those who had not been tried for dishonesty. Children deemed dishonest were granted the right to rehabilitation, providing motiva-

tion for the child to modify his or her inappropriate behavior.

The Judicial Board, another governing structure, met once a week to provide the children with an opportunity to deliberate the consequences of anti-social behavior (Korczak 1967a). The Judicial Board consisted of one instructor and two student judges. The purpose of the Board was to mediate the most difficult cases as well as propose legislation. In this way, children became part of the authority structure.

Like the Judicial Board, the Court of Peers convened once a week. Korczak deemed the Court of Peers to be the nucleus of the emancipated school he envisioned. It provided a forum in which the children could be taken seriously and judged fairly by peers. Without the Court of Peers, children would be dependent simply on the teacher's discretion and authority. Korczak (1967a) defined the Court of Peers as a self-governing infrastructure that defended the timid, the conscientious, and hard working; "disorder," he said, "does the most harm to the good, the quiet, and conscientious."

The Court of Peers provided an alternative to traditional forms of school authority and strove to create a just social environment based on due process and participatory democracy. Court cases involved staff, including Korczak, but significant responsibility was transferred to students. The Code of the Court of Peers consisted of 1,000 articles that guided adults and children alike. The articles were divided according to infraction and punishment. Articles ranged from minor infractions to severe infractions that could result in expulsion. In those cases, the guilty party could apply for readmission after three months. Thus, the children were guided by a judicial system in which they participated, with graded punishments meted out according to infractions of the Code. At the

same time, children were confronted with decisions involving complex issues of justice and real consequences.

Judgments were registered, read aloud, and posted on the bulletin board. Defendants who wanted to appeal a judgment had the opportunity to do so within a month. Reading the judgments aloud enabled all children to learn from one another's mistakes or violations. In addition, corrections to the judgments could be made. Posting judgments reminded everyone of the Court's proceedings and of socially acceptable conduct. In this way, the school structure mimicked the social order that was central to Korczak's visions.

In *How to Love a Child* (1967a) and *Ghetto Diary* (1978), Korczak emphasized work as an essential component of democratic living. He regarded all work as important; no work was deemed nobler than any other. In one essay, Korczak (1978) expounded on his desire to instill the attitude that all work, even the most menial, was honorable. To illustrate that point, he himself often cleared the table after meals. Moreover, how a child worked, according to Korczak, expressed his or her personality. In the Children's Republic, the broom became a symbol of dignity. Each child worked according to his or her ability, thereby contributing in different ways to the functioning of the Children's Republic and at the same time providing a model of how the larger society might function.

The orphanage newspaper also was critical to the operation of the Children's Republic. Published weekly, the newspaper served to bind the school community.

In *On the School Newspaper*, Korczak (1967b) expressed the view that a children's newspaper also served as a strong motivator for children who were unable to read or write. Children wanted to learn to read so that they could read the gazette. Similarly, children wanted to learn to write to their

newspaper with their suggestions and concerns. Further, Korczak suggested that the newspaper helped children learn that it sometimes takes considerable courage to voice one's opinion. Another benefit of this involvement was that students learned to engage in controversy based on argumentation rather than resorting to mere bickering or the use of naked authority. Like the governing structures, the news-

paper fostered the idealized social community that lay at the heart of Korczak's schools.

To be sure, a child's participation in activities such as the court, parliament, and children's newspaper provided an educational process that promoted self-development through assumption of responsibility. Beyond that, however, participation enhanced opportunities for a child to develop decision-making skills and the realization of his or her democratic impulses. In Korczak's pedagogy, self-development was part and parcel of his effort to remake social relations and recast institutional structures within the school and the larger social order.

SOME PEDAGOGICAL QUESTIONS

Careful observation and recording of children's behavior at different developmental stages, as well as the integration of

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biological, medical, psychological, and pedagogical data, provided the basis for *How to Love a Child* (Korczak, 1967a). Due to his premature death, Korczak was unable to finish this task. Further, the voluminous data he had collected were destroyed as well. Perhaps, with more time, Korczak would have completed his theory and corrected some of his educational philosophy's limitations.

According to Korczak (1967a), active community life would attune children to matters of social justice and cooperative decision-making in the school, thereby creating a miniature, embryonic democracy. Participation by the child, for example, was critical to his or her own developmental process. Little is known, however, of the extent of the children's participation in the key governing structures. From Korczak's writing, one can create a reasonably coherent picture of what he intended; but without independent data, it is difficult to imagine how those ideas functioned in the schools he directed.

Legitimate questions arise as to what a Korczak school, particularly a modern-day Korczak school, might look like. To what extent could his reforms function successfully in an actual school? Do Korczak's ideas represent an inviting but unrealizable ideal? How would the reforms he wrought in pre-World War II schools survive more than a half-century later in an entirely different culture with a radically different school population?

THE DEMOCRATIC SCHOOL: A CONTEMPORARY ISRAELI SCHOOL REFLECTING JANUSZ KORCZAK'S PEDAGOGY

As a result of the collaborative efforts of a group of educators and parents, the Democratic School, grades kindergarten through eighth grade, opened in the fall of 1987. Menachem Kaplan assumed the role of principal, and the curriculum met the

required standards set by the Ministry of Education. By deliberate design, the Democratic School was based on Korczak's principles.

According to Kaplan (Engel 1999), the founders chose to base the school's operation on Korczak's pedagogical reforms for several reasons. First, Korczak provided general pedagogical principles rather than a precise prescription, and the founders felt that they could adapt Korczak's principles to a different setting and school population. Second, Korczak is well known in Israel, whose population includes the greatest number of Holocaust survivors. Third, the founders of the Democratic School, according to Kaplan, sought to create a democratic alternative to the traditional European-style schools on which the Israeli school system is based. Fourth, and most importantly, the founders, like Korczak himself, saw the school as a means of conveying democratic principles to a new generation.

The Democratic School is clearly different from the typical Israeli school. It nevertheless exists within the overall framework of Israeli public education. Some comparison and contrast is provided to differentiate how the Democratic School functions compared to Israeli schools in general and how it departs from standard Israeli practice.

The present-day educational system is based on the 1949 Compulsory Education Law, the 1953 State Education Law, certain provisions passed by Israel's parliament, and amendments to existing laws. The Compulsory Education Law provided free educational opportunities to all children ages 5–13, or kindergarten through eighth grade. An amendment of the law made education compulsory for children ages 5–16. According to the State Education Law:

Education in Israel is based on the values of Jewish culture and the

achievements of science, on love of Homeland and loyalty to the State and the Jewish people, on practice in agricultural work and handicraft, on pioneer training, and on striving for a society built on freedom, equality, tolerance, mutual assistance, and love of mankind.

Toward these ends, a prescribed core curriculum is provided. It seeks to equip all children, immigrants as well as native-born Israelis, with a common language and a common basis of knowledge, values, and ideals (Bentwich 1965). In part, this also is accomplished by providing supplementary lessons, forming smaller classes, appointing mentor teachers to guide and advise beginning teachers, providing books as well as supplementary teaching aids and materials, and instituting extra-curricular activities including club and recreational activities.

Like other public schools, the Democratic School's academic year begins in September and concludes at the end of June. The academic week is a standard six days, 30–35 hours long. Instruction in the lower grades, like in other Israeli public schools, takes place in self-contained classes where a single teacher teaches most subjects. Unlike public secondary schools, the high school curriculum in the Democratic School is not differentiated according to Israel's tripartite tracking system: academic, vocational, and agricultural (Kleinberger 1969). In contrast to Israeli high schools, students at the Democratic High School choose their own courses.

The expectation is that one should treat others according to rules and principles democratically arrived at and democratically practiced.

The Ministry of Education provides a basic curriculum for all state-run schools whether they are *mamlachti* (state-secular) or *mamlachti-dati* (state-religious). *Mamlachti* schools are coeducational while *mamlachti-dati* may be either mixed or gender specific.

In recent years, Israel has seen the growth of a movement involving greater parental involvement that has resulted in establishing state-supported schools such as the Democratic School and TALI (a Hebrew acronym for Intensified Jewish Studies Curriculum) schools. TALI is an alternative school that emphasizes Jewish secular culture. TALI schools are analogous in some ways to charter schools in the United States.

The curriculum established by the Ministry of Education for state-supported schools defines the number of lesson-periods per week for each subject in each grade and the subject content (Iram and Schmida 1998). In *mamlachti-dati* schools, more time (60 percent) is assigned to Jewish subjects such as the Bible, the Talmud, and Hebrew Literature than to secular studies. In contrast, schools affiliated with the Labor Movement, a political party in Israel, assign 70 percent of the time to secular studies and 30 percent to Jewish studies. These schools emphasize Hebrew language and Jewish culture, in addition to the development of secular studies.

After completing eight years of primary school, students in traditional schools—but not at the Democratic School—advance to the tripartite tracking system. Separate high schools exist for each

track. Students are chosen for the academic track, which prepares students for college entrance, based on their academic performance. Those who successfully complete the academic school have a higher probability of passing the exam for admittance into an institute of higher education. According to Iram and Schmida (1998), academic high schools remain the most prestigious type of secondary education, and students who earn their matriculation certificates are considered to be the future elite of Israel society. Half of the graduating seniors at the Democratic School take the exam for admission into Israeli institutes of higher education.

The Democratic School, a *mamlachti* school, purports to differ from Israeli public schools by virtue of its commitment to Korczak's pedagogy. Oddly enough, despite such a formal commitment to Korczak's pedagogy, teachers and other educational professionals in the Democratic school were not acquainted with the major features of Korczak's work. When interviewed, Yaffa, the home economics teacher, seemed curious, but uninformed: "From you [the researcher], we'll hear about Janusz Korczak . . . we don't know anything about his educational philosophy." Gedalyah, the newly appointed male physics teacher, asked, "What are the pedagogies of Janusz Korczak?" Both Yaffa and Gedalyah recognized Korczak's name and wanted to learn about his pedagogy, but were not consciously attempting to implement his ideas in their classes.

By contrast, Kaplan exhibited a breadth of knowledge about Korczak's educational principles, in particular those elements of the pedagogy that he thought applied to Israeli society. As Kaplan said in one interview (Engel 1999, 91-92):

Korczak understood children as rational beings, whose participation was essential in matters concerning

them, such as education. . . . Within the framework of Israel democratic society, the founders [of the Democratic School] chose to emphasize Korczak's concept of the Court of Peers because it embodies his recognition of children as persons of individual worth, deserving fair treatment. Also, Korczak recognized the powerful effect that social censure can have in a caring community. The Court is critical because it draws in the community to arbitrate between individuals of equal power. The Court's goal is justice through equality and fairness. The school would be a model of democratic justice.

The flourishing of Korczak's pedagogical commitments in the Democratic School is likely a function of comparable organizational structures that were created through Kaplan's leadership rather than teachers' familiarity with Korczak's work. The physical layout of the Democratic school, for example, reinforces the commitment to democratic interactions. The school's layout de-emphasizes formal authority. The lack of a central principal's office reflects an emphasis on widespread participation and ease of communication, and symbolizes the rejection of a traditional authority structure emanating from the principal's office. A multipurpose courtyard contributes to the open community by facilitating informal interchanges between staff and student and between student and student.

Several bungalows that house classrooms and offices encircle the Democratic School's courtyard. Kaplan does not have a desk except for a picnic table behind the administrative offices. There is currently no faculty or student lounge. Students seem to have independently claimed a place outdoors, commonly known as the Tree. Like the village well of yesteryear, the Tree is a

place to meet and chat. The students' bulletin board is attached to the Tree, and several picnic tables stand in its shade. The Tree's bulletin board supplements the Democratic School's central bulletin board. The central bulletin board, which posts announcements, student attendance sheets, community bulletins, posters, and an internal mailbox, is located on the outside wall of the administrative building.

Divisions of rank or status dissipate because of the informality of exchanges that transpire under the Tree. As Rivka, a female high school student, said, "The strength of the school is sitting by the Tree." To Rivka, being outside, sitting under the Tree, epitomizes independence and responsibility. At the Tree, students do homework and engage in banter as well as serious discussion. There are no bells announcing classes; students are responsible for getting there on time.

The informal gatherings at the Tree represent the Democratic School's unusual authority structure. Teachers and administrative staff are highly visible and interact with students on a casual basis. Concerns of students and parents are freely voiced, listened to, and acted upon. Students, for example, were dissatisfied with the instruction provided by a first-year English teacher, and presented their concerns directly to Kaplan. In response, the principal appointed someone else to take over the teaching responsibilities. On another occasion, the principal acted upon a request by kindergarten students and their parents for a new kindergarten-level English course.

Like Korczak's newspaper *The Little Review*, the Democratic School's newspaper offers another opportunity for community building through direct participation in the important functions of the school. According to Korczak (1967a, 404), a newspaper binds the members of the school, "the students, the professional staff, and the ser-

vice staff into an integral whole." It serves as the conscience of the school community both through reporting events and by editorializing. At the Democratic School, every change in policy or regulation, complaint, and shortcoming can become the basis of a newspaper column. Students also form bonds through their shared newspaper writing experience. The newspaper, according to Korczak (1967b), should aspire to provide perspective as well as balanced opinion on all issues, and serve to benefit the teaching staff as well. The Democratic School's newspaper somehow succeeds in reflecting these ideals.

SCHOOL GOVERNANCE IN THE DEMOCRATIC SCHOOL

Various activities foster community at the Democratic School. When problems arise, they become the responsibility of the community rather than the administrators alone. If the secretary is absent, for example, various school community members chip in to provide telephone support. Working together with a common purpose also serves to strengthen the sense of community. To prepare for a visit from 65 Israeli mayors, students, parents, teachers, and administrative staff worked side by side for two days, painting, planting, and picking up trash. Preparing for the visit became a community undertaking.

Most significantly, the self-governing structures that Korczak devised, such as the Court of Peers, the Parliament, and participation in the self-governance of the school, have their counterparts at the Democratic School. The expectation is that one should treat others according to rules and principles arrived at democratically and practiced democratically. In this sense, the founders of the Democratic School incorporated Korczak's principles by setting up a parliament, a court system, and a relationship between student and teacher simi-

lar to the ones in Korczak's orphanages. The school's organizational structure, rather than a conscious allegiance to Korczak's pedagogical principles, is central to the school's functioning. Though school personnel (apart from the principal) seem to be only dimly aware of Korczak's pedagogy, the school nevertheless reflects a notable survival of his work.

The school's system of self-governance, as presented in *The Democratic School Handbook* (1996), consists of four authorities: the legislative authority, the judicial authority, the executive authority, and the controlling authority. In effect, these four authorities represent the governing structure of the school—at least the formal one. Succinctly, the legislative authority of the school is represented by the Parliament. The judicial authority consists of the discipline and appellate committees. Anyone who comes before the discipline committee is considered innocent until proven guilty and is entitled to a fair and just hearing. The appellate committee functions as a supreme court. The executive authority consists of the budget committee, teachers' committee, student acceptance committee, special events committee, justice and constitution committee, school trips committee, as well as ad hoc committees such as the building committee. The Democratic School's controlling authority coordinates checks and balances for the executive authority and investigates undemocratic procedures.

FINAL THOUGHTS

The vast majority of the student population at the Democratic School was Ashkenazi, Jews of European descent, middle or upper-middle class, and from well-educated liberal families. Though the evidence concerning the academic effects of alternative schools is not conclusive, the curriculum of these schools seems to serve the cultural interests of a segment of the

educated middle class (Swidler 1979). Most of the parents in the Democratic School are professional, technical, or intellectual persons who value the creativity, freedom, and autonomy compatible with the values of alternative schools. These values are often the same ones that some high-status colleges seek in their students (Swidler, 1979). Hence, according to Kaplan, despite the Democratic school's unorthodox practices, students have acquired the kind of education that makes for success in institutions of higher learning and professions, particularly those that require creativity and flexible problem-solving skills. Kaplan reported that many students become educators, social workers, and judges.

There is a certain irony that the pedagogy developed by Korczak in his two orphanages with predominantly lower-class children now finds expression in the Israeli middle class. But Korczak himself was a product of a middle-class upbringing. This, along with the influence of his fellow experimental educators, as well as social and political developments in Europe, shaped his pedagogy. Though his pedagogy was revolutionary in many respects, it now appeals to a segment of the Israeli middle-class because of its promise of conferring certain advantages on their children. It also serves as an alternative for students who reject traditional authority structures and seek unorthodox outlets for expressing their individuality.

In the Democratic School, teachers and students reject the traditional forms of teacher authority and replace them with informal mechanisms entailing close teacher-student relationships and shared responsibility. Thus, the teacher's authority in the classroom is superseded by an emphasis on personal influence and a sense of intimacy. For the most part, students strive to "do the right thing" out of a sense of responsibility to the school community. In this

sense, the Democratic School substitutes close personal relationships for traditional authority structures. The interests of both parents and students in the Democratic School are therefore served by education that on one hand breaks with traditional patterns of authority while on the other does not impede—and perhaps even enhances—the chances of higher education and social standing.

Most significantly, the Democratic School is able to manifest Korczak's pedagogy through the existence of parallel structures used more than a half-century earlier. Founders of the Democratic School are able to incorporate Korczak's key principles into their school's day-to-day operations, not by holding seminars or workshops on his philosophy, but by establishing organizational patterns that embody the sort of democratic spirit that Korczak envisioned. The organizational structure of the school rather than informed allegiance to Korczak's pedagogical principles is central to the

school's functioning and its commitment to his democratic ideals.

It is remarkable that a good deal of Korczak's reforms survived in the Democratic School when one considers how different the schools are in time and geography as well as the social classes and economic circumstances of their school populations. While it would be tempting to attribute the survival of these reforms solely to the power of Korczak's ideas, this conclusion would be incongruent with the fact that the majority of the professionals in the Democratic School were ignorant of those ideas. What seems incontrovertible is that the organizational features of the Democratic School closely resembled those of Korczak's Children's Republic. It would seem, therefore, that the survival of pedagogical reform probably is more closely related to the organizational features of a school than to a formally expressed philosophy or set of principles.

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