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# JANUSZ KORCZAK

## LEGACY OF A PRACTITIONER-RESEARCHER

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*For more than 30 years, Janusz Korczak (1878-1942) devoted his life to educating orphaned Jewish children, and he stayed with them to the end as they all perished in the Treblinka concentration camp. In his teaching and writing, Korczak encouraged teachers to become autonomous knowledge producers by questioning and interrogating their work. Korczak not only conceptualized this perception but also embodied it throughout his work as an educator. He was a pioneer in recognizing the contributions of teacher research to serving the students' interests and to the teacher's own sense of empowerment. He respected the capabilities of science and objective measurement but at the same time appreciated the uniqueness and mysterious nature of the human soul that requires subjective, context-related, and intuitive perspective. For Korczak, research was the practical tool that would allow practitioner-researchers to spread their wings and dream of possibilities.*

**Keywords:** *action research; teacher research; Janusz Korczak; teacher knowledge*

You are not working for your homeland, the community of the future unless you are working toward enriching your own soul. Only by getting can you give, only by growing in one's own spirit can one collaborate in the development of others.

Korczak (1919/1967, p. 5)

This call for nurturing self-development in the practice of teaching was expressed by Janusz Korczak (1878-1942), an educator, a humanist, a reformer, a gifted author, and a pediatrician. The Korczak legend was born in August 1942 when he accompanied the 200 children of the Jewish orphanage of Warsaw to a death camp in Poland. His death, often compared to that of Socrates and Martin Luther King, was a moral declaration, as were his life work and his educational vision. At the age of 33, already a literary and medical success, Korczak left his clinical practice and devoted his

life to work for the benefit of orphans. For more than 30 years, Janusz Korczak directed two orphanages: The Children's Home for Jewish Children (1911-1942) and its Christian counterpart, Our Home (1919-1939). The institutions became model democratic communities based on children's self-rule; they had their own parliament, court, and newspaper. Throughout these years, Korczak dedicated his life to the orphaned children, from poor and broken families, aged 7 to 14. He lived with them, worked with them, taught them, and learned from them. He listened to their stories, observed them in their moments of sorrow and joy, and was *with* them, and *for* them, until his and their last days. After Nazi Germany conquered Poland, friends offered him asylum and were able to arrange his escape, but Korczak refused and stayed with the children to the end.

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Korczak's life and ideas have inspired educators throughout the world. His educational experience, thoughts, and insights are revealed in his pedagogical and literary writings, letters, lectures, radio conversations, and his ghetto diary, most of which have been translated into many languages.<sup>1</sup> Books and articles have been written about his life and educational ideas.<sup>2</sup> Most of these writings are focused on Korczak's life story, his struggle for children's rights, and the self-governing children's communities he formed in the orphanages. The purpose of this article is to highlight a facet of Korczak's work that is less familiar—Korczak as a researcher and as a proponent of teacher research.

In his teaching and writing, Korczak encouraged teachers to become autonomous knowledge producers by questioning and interrogating their work. Korczak not only conceptualized this role but also embodied it throughout his work as an educator. He was a pioneer in recognizing the contributions of teacher research to serving the students' interests and to the teacher's own sense of empowerment. His educational knowledge was formed, tested, and shaped in his daily practice. He used numerous systematic inquiry methods to increase his understanding of the children in his charge, recognizing the value of specificity and particularity in the formulation of theory. He respected science and objective measurement but at the same time appreciated that the uniqueness and mysterious nature of the human soul requires subjective, context-related, and intuitive perspective (Arnon, 1971). Korczak's ideas are still relevant to the current educational discourse and may stimulate new insights into the role of the educator as a researcher and knowledge producer who is an active advocate of change and reform. Although in Europe and in Israel Korczak's work is studied in universities and many symposia are dedicated to his pedagogical and literary writings, Korczak's ideas are less known to American educators. I hope that this article will introduce educators to Korczak's far-sighted vision of educational research and his inspiring and enlightening educational thoughts.

This article discusses Korczak's views and actions with regard to (a) the role of practice and theory in teachers' professional development; (b) teacher self-development through self-knowledge and research; (c) Korczak's own voyage as a practitioner-researcher; and (d) Korczak's research as a precursor to contemporary action research and practitioner research. I conclude with reflections on the contributions and challenges that Korczak's work presents to current practitioner-researchers.

### THE ROLE OF PRACTICE AND THEORY IN TEACHERS' PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Korczak was a learned man and well versed in pedagogical theory (Valojeva, 1996). However, he was suspicious of the theorists' presumption to guide educators in their practice, and he resented the view of teachers as passive transmitters of knowledge, authorized from above. He mocked the pretentious "expert" whose theoretical principles have limited value for the daily struggles of teachers:

[The theoretician] will say over and over again the clichés of common knowledge. The same pious wishes, lukewarm lies, impractical suggestions. The teacher ought to . . . ought to . . . ought to . . . In the final analysis, the teacher must decide in all matters, greater and lesser, for himself, to the best of his knowledge and ability. (Korczak, 1914/1967b, pp. 244-245)

In an interesting article, "Knowledge vis-à-vis Practice" (1924/2001), Korczak compared the role of theory and practice in teachers' professional development. He stated, "Thanks to theory I know, thanks to practice I feel. Theory enriches the intellect; practice colors feelings, trains the will" (p. 47). Armed with knowledge of one's own specific circumstances, the educator picks and chooses the particular practice that is most appropriate. This is a personal and professional process, Korczak asserted, in which the practitioner is distrustful of both others' and his or her own opinion. "I don't know, I search, I ask questions. . . . By deepening I complicate. . . . Every 'elsewhere' is a new stimulus for the efforts of thought" (p. 48). As a result of

these “trials and tribulations” (p. 50), teachers construct their own practical knowledge.

Carter (1992, p. 111) defined teacher knowledge as “practical and contextualized in the sense that it is knowledge of common dilemmas teachers face” and as “personal, in the sense that teachers formulate and draw upon their personal understandings of the practical circumstances in which they work.” The perception of teachers as both users and generators of theory was introduced by Schon’s (1987) depiction of teaching as an intellectual process that requires teachers to identify problems that classrooms present and solve these problems through a deliberate process of reflecting in action and reflecting on action. In many ways, Korczak’s concept of the role of practice in forming a teacher’s personal theory of teaching was a precursor to the current notion of teacher’s knowledge. There were a few contemporaries in the early 20th century, such as Dewey (1929), who shared Korczak’s “radical” view. But although they only conceptualized it, Korczak set his ideas into daily practice (Bettleheim, 1997).

Korczak valued teachers’ personal, experiential, situational, and relational knowledge. His belief in the personal practical knowledge (see Clandinin & Connelly, 1995) draws on the teacher’s “own knowledge, passion, beliefs and in accordance to the specific contextual circumstances in which one has to act” (Korczak, 1978, p. 305) and was the starting point for his educational body of thought. In the introduction to the book *How to Love a Child*, he “warned” the reader not to look for rules and ready prescriptions in the book because, if there are any, “That has happened not only despite but even against the writer’s will” (Korczak, 1914/1967b, p. 83). Korczak indeed never presented his ideas as a didactic doctrine and bluntly declined to prescribe and to hand out recipes. Again and again, he emphasized that no book and no expert can replace the educators’ own thoughts and insights. He declares categorically, “To demand that anyone should provide processed thoughts is like asking a strange woman to give birth to your own child” (p. 84). There are no short cuts, he added, “There are thoughts that can be born

only of your own pain and precisely those are the most precious ones” (p. 84).

## TEACHER SELF-DEVELOPMENT THROUGH SELF-KNOWLEDGE AND RESEARCH

Commitment to self-development through self-knowledge, experimentation, and research were a key to teacher improvement. This process of growth and renewal is a never-ending process. According to Korczak, remembers Arnon (1983, p. 27), who was a teacher in the orphanage, “The good pedagogue . . . is always seeking to improve and instruct himself in his work.” Loss of hope, boredom, and stagnation are the threatening factors for professional decline. The novice teachers and the “burned-out” veteran practitioners are the most vulnerable. Most beginner teachers join the profession full of enthusiasm and “romantic and sentimental love” for children (Korczak, 1914/1967b). Once they face the reality of classroom life, many are confounded and become overwhelmed and disillusioned. On the other side of the professional scale, there are the veterans, tired teachers, who are subject to habits and to the deadening effects of routine. But a professional crisis can serve as a path to growth. “Without realizing it,” Korczak (1914/1967b) told a frustrated teacher, “you are already searching for the right track” (pp. 247-248). The starting point for change and reform is the teacher himself or herself, and the process will not start “unless you work toward enriching your own soul” (Korczak, 1919/1967a, p. 6). This lifelong, never-ending professional rejuvenation requires three interdependent elements: (a) self-knowledge, (b) self-education, and (c) commitment to research.

### **Self-Knowledge**

A precondition and a cornerstone of the process of self-development is awareness of the roots of self as a human being and as an educator, which is what Mayers (2001) calls “ontological reflectivity” (p. 477). “Be true to yourself,” advised Korczak (1914/1967b), “seek your own

road. Learn to know yourself before you attempt to know the children" (p. 247). Being sensitive to one's own memories of childhood experiences enables the teacher to examine school life and teacher-student interaction from the children's perspective. An essential part of self-knowledge is admitting mistakes. Bad teachers blame the students, the school environment, or the society for their problems, whereas reflective teachers identify the problems, reflect, and search for creative solutions.

### **Self-Education**

Professional puzzlement is a springboard for engagement in self-education. It is expressed by the inciting "I don't know," which stimulates a creative probing of unquestioned theories and prevailing assumptions. Those questions are invaluable:

The question is much more important than the answer. It is a guide for thoughts on the way towards goals. . . . Whether in a dream or in awakened state, in the everyday matters these are moments when a question is born and there are hours when it matures. Now I will await not for the answers but the question. (Korczak, 1978, p. 70)

He recognized that the vibrant power of the question and the fog that accompanies the uncertainty of "I don't know" may seem as a "torturous void" (p. 70), but it is the enticement for research, for new thoughts and creative solutions.

### **Commitment to Research**

Janusz Korczak believed that teachers' inquiry into their work is the crown of their professional improvement. Observation of children was a prerequisite to what he defined as "pedagogical love" that, in contrast to "sentimental love," is based on a deep knowledge of the children, accepting and respecting them for whom they are. Korczak (1914/1967b) recommended that all teachers, even beginners, conduct systematic inquiry. There were two requirements: (a) The researcher had to be sufficiently disciplined to ensure responsible subjectivity. "Let him justify his standpoint, cite exam-

ples, substantiate with casuistry" (p. 324), and (b) the teacher-researcher should not treat the child as a research object or as a means in what Buber (1947) called an "I-it" relationship. The purpose of research should not serve any interest except that of the child, who should be treated as a unique human being that deserves full respect. "Children . . . are people—not people to be, not people of the future, not people of tomorrow, but people now . . . right now . . . today" (Korczak, 1914/1967b, p. 254).

Korczak believed that teachers' observations and experience-based knowledge need to be shared with other educators in a dialogue wherein each teacher is true to self while interacting with multiple I's of others (Wojnowska, 2001, p. 136). Together, teachers' knowledge doubles and triples and they come closer to the evasive "truth." This truth, in Korczak's eyes, is still only a stage in the next level of knowledge, as knowledge is "not . . . either an absolute nor an immutable conviction. Let today always be no more than a transition from the sum total of yesterdays to tomorrow's still greater experiences" (Korczak, 1914/1967b, p. 324-325).

Only under these conditions will the teacher's work be neither monotonous nor hopeless. Commitment to professional development will bring "both reward and encouragement to go on studying to further efforts" (Korczak, 1914/1967b, p. 325). The teacher who remains enthusiastic and dedicated to the teaching profession will find that every day brings "something new, unexpected, and unusual. Each day passed will be enriched with a new contribution" (p. 325).

### **KORCZAK'S VOYAGE AS A PRACTITIONER-RESEARCHER**

Korczak's ideas about teacher's knowledge growing out of self-knowledge, continued development, and research have the power to inspire contemporary educators by the force of his example. Korczak was a reflexive person who looked deeply and honestly into himself and his actions. He was a lifelong learner and never stopped researching the educational setting and continuously questioning his own knowledge and assumptions (Cohen, 1994). In a

letter sent to a beginner teacher, he admits, "We ourselves [in the orphanage] are trying, always searching, never satisfying with what is, looking with curiosity at tomorrow" (Korczak, 1978, p. 173). Korczak's knowledge was based on what he learned from decades of systematic inquiry into children's emotional, intellectual, and physical growth and into their social interactions among themselves and with adults. He filed thousands of detailed reports of child observation, records of measurements, documentations, charts, and surveys. The impetus for the great importance Korczak attributes to research and child observation was influenced, as he often commented, by his medical studies and his experience as a physician. "What a fever, a cough or nausea is for a physician, so a smile, a tear or a blush should be for an educator. Not a single symptom lacks significance" (Korczak, 1919/1967a, p. 3).

In a questionnaire<sup>3</sup> that Korczak had to fill out for the German authorities during World War II, he defined his scientific work as "child observation," and he regarded the educational settings in which he lived and worked with the children as "a research center" (Korczak, 1919/1967a, p. 3). In his memoir, written in the Warsaw ghetto, he reflected on his lifelong work as an educator-researcher. Late at night, only a few weeks before the death march, he wrote

I have an investigative mind, not an inventive one.  
Investigating in order to know? No.  
To inquire in order to ascertain, to probe to the very bottom?  
Not that either.  
Investigating, rather, in order to ask further and further questions. (Korczak, 1958/1979, p. 93)

He continued his spiritual self-search and remembered that as a child he was not curious about how things work, nor was he interested in the mechanism of things, but he was fascinated by "the essence of thing, thing all for itself, in itself" (Korczak, 1958/1979, p. 93). Trying to analyze his own intellectual and emotional foundation, he concluded that it was formed under the influence of two contradictory sources. His studies in Berlin taught him to concentrate on what is known and to proceed systematically, rationally, and in orderly fashion in his research.

Paris, on the other hand, gave him the gift of passion to go after the unknown "with brilliant premonition, powerful hope and unexpected triumph . . . the pain of ignorance and the delight of seeking" (Korczak, 1914/1967b, p. 318). These two approaches together, he concluded, served him in his lifelong quest for the "great synthesis of a child" (p. 318). The quest was a challenging endeavor, because for Korczak the child was a mystery. He confessed before young teachers, "I am reading the same child once, twice, three and ten times, and after all that I still know only very little, for a child is a vast, wide world" (Korczak, 1978, p. 305). The challenge is even greater when the educator observes and tries to understand the dynamics of a group of children.

One child—a huge wide world, two children—three worlds. The world of each child separately and of both together. Three children are not one plus one plus one, for in addition to the three we have first and second together, the first and the third together and the second and third together, and on top of that the world of all three together and we have seven worlds. . . . The world of ten, twenty, thirty children are beyond calculation. (p. 303)

The child is the teacher's irrefutable partner in solving his or her inner world. Once a teacher gains the child's trust, and the child opens up and confides in the teacher, there are less puzzlements and uncertainties because children "know more about themselves than I do. Only a child keeps his own company all day and all night" (Korczak, 2001, p. 55). In this dialogical relation "two equally matured moments—mine and the child's—intertwine" (Korczak, 1929/1992a, p. 179).

Three fundamental questions guided his quest for the "child's essence" and served as a base for his educational research: (a) the children's past, memories, and heritage, (b) their present life, relationships with self and with others, and (c) how can he, the educator, help them best to be what they can be (Cohen, 1994).

I kiss the children with a glance, a thought, a question. Who are you, who are such a wonderful secret to me, and what shall you bring with you? I kiss you with an effort of will: How can I help you? I kiss as the astronomer kisses the star, which is, who has been, and which will be. (Korczak, 1992a, p. 183-184)

To gain the answer to these questions, Korczak utilized three inquiry methods that provided different perspectives of the child: (a) empirical or empirically based research, (b) interpretative child observation, and (c) glancing into the child's perspective of life.

### **Empirically Based Research**

Korczak (1979) appreciated the contribution of empirically based research in following children's development. He kept careful track of the children's physical, mental, and behavioral growth. He recorded children's fights, their patterns of play, and their frequency of tardiness. In his memoir, he notes with pride, "Statistics gave me the discipline of logical thinking and an objective way of dealing with facts" (p. xiv).

This view reflected the prevailing perception of educational research at the turn of the 20th century. Yifrach (2001), who analyzed Korczak's intellectual breeding ground, notes the imperative impact of Polish positivism, greatly influenced by August Comte, on the formation of Korczak's worldview. Comte popularized the idea that society, like nature, is governed by natural law, and therefore the methods used for research in the physical sciences should be used also in human. Child study, based on a collection of empirical, verifiable data of children's cognitive, behavioral, and physical development, became a focus of psychological and pedagogical research at that time, and Korczak (1996, p. 348) referred several times in his writings to this research.

However, Korczak (1914/1967b) broke free from the boundaries of empirical-based research. Facing the child as a practitioner, he recognized that although a human being is an "independent atom in space," "a speck of dust—a nothing," this speck "embraces in thought everything: the stars, and ocean, mountains and abysses. . . . Herein is the contradiction in the human being, raised from dust, which God has made his dwelling" (pp. 86-87). He questioned whether the objective facts of science can grant insight into the mysteries of the human being and capture the subtleties of interpersonal emotions. His conclusion was that

there are two kinds of truth with regard to inquiry of children: A "great truth" and a "lesser truth." In the inquiry into the children's world and education, Korczak declares, "Of importance is the nature of the life system and what it wants. That is great, though decisively unexplained, truth" (p. 128). Graphs and measurements are valuable, he argued, but they cannot convey the dynamic and multiple nuances of the art of education; "for life is not a collection of arithmetic problems with always one answer or, at most, two procedures" (p. 250).

In addition, Korczak did not share the positivists' belief in the predictability of science (Mencwel, 1997). For Korczak, the certainty of modernism's point of view was replaced with almost a postmodernist's nonstop search for truth. In the second edition of *How to Love a Child*, Korczak (1929/1996) admitted,

Fifteen years have passed; many questions, assumptions and doubts were added. The distrust towards set truths increased. The educator's truths are but a subjective sum of his experience, . . . the latest moment of his interpretations and hunches. Its value is in its wealth and weight. (p. 7)

### **Interpretative Child Observation**

Korczak transcends the language of the positivist proposition to seek an understanding of the "great truth of education" through more hermeneutical principles of interpretation. He created what was for his time a very radical style of inquiry by using a personal, subjective language in his effort to gain insight into the complexity of school life and child interpersonal relationship with self and others. He was also one of the first in the field of education who went beyond the academic area and researched the pupil's social life and emotions (Dror, 1998).

The monograph *Educational Factors* (Korczak, 1919/1967a) contains a great wealth of close observation, subjective interpretations, and critical reflection on the research process. It encouraged teachers to adopt note taking and journal writing as a required tool of their profession. It is not a how-to book, with a structured outline of the way observation should be conducted. Rather, it is a detailed description of his personal, laborious experience with note tak-

ing. It shares the intricacies involved and reveals, in the process, his struggles to come closer to the truth.

Korczak's (1919/1967a) observations were always context specific, with a detailed description of the concrete situation and the participants. The focus of his observations is the individual child and the dynamics of a group. Here is a sample of an observation note taken in first grade during an arithmetic class:

Bolek rubs his chin, pulls his ear, shakes his head, looks out of the window, bounces up and down the bench, . . . leans forward as if about to leap, waves his arms. . . . "please, miss, I'll go to the board." You say—"write this down!" He grabs his pen, waves it in the air. . . . You say: "what's 332 and 332?" He reckons quickly—looks round him, "Got it?" and then in a subdued voice to himself: "Slick—aren't we, like the win-nd. . . ." (pp. 7-8)

One of the original features of Korczak's observation notes is his depiction of the authentic speech of children, their unique style of expressing themselves as part of their culture and ethnicity, including their grammatical and syntactical mistakes. Another salient characteristic of his observation notes is the reflective, honest, and self-critical retrospective on the inquiry process. He reveals his doubts, mistakes, and frustrations with himself as he reacts to his own notes. A typical example is his reaction to assumptions he had made about a student who, based on the teacher's comments, he had considered academically weak. Then, the student raised her hand:

Comment: I have unwillingly recorded that Wladzia . . . has volunteered an answer. Why? Because it seems contrary to my view of her as a poor pupil! I err in wanting her to be as I have seen her. But my duty is to probe her as she really is, to be intent on observing every indication, and comprehensively. I am just too lazy. I want Wladzia to be easy to read. . . . Little Wladzia's upraised hand is the protest of a vital being not content with such treatment, not accepting the label; she says: "You don't know me!" (Korczak, 1919/1967a, pp. 14-15)

With all the difficulties, the self-doubts, and self-criticism of the process, Korczak was confident that there is no replacement for note taking as part of self-development and professional

improvement and that it is vital for all teachers to be engaged in it.

### ***Child's Perspective of School Life***

The third method of inquiry that Korczak (1925/1992b) used was research "dressed up" as literary work. The poetic book *When I Am Little Again* tells the story of a teacher who is magically transformed into a child and therefore is able to understand and analyze the child-adult relationships from both sides. The teacher who becomes a child again realizes how often children are misunderstood, misjudged, and underappreciated by adults. "Our speech is meager and awkward . . . that's why it seems to you that we think little and feel even less. . . . You don't understand our ways and have no insight into our affairs. . . . We are exceedingly complicated beings" (p. 83).

Simon (1949, p. 32) calls this method "systematic psychological regression," whereas Binczycka, (1997, p. 130) defines it as a "view from inside." Several researchers (e.g., Beiner, 1997; Kurzweil, 1968; Simon, 1949; Wojnowska, 2001) commented that this research method resembles Buber's (1947) "inclusion," wherein the teacher experiences the educational setting through the eyes of the student.

Experiencing school from the receiving end, the teacher-turned-child resolves that when he will be a teacher again he will try to reach an understanding with his students "so that there should not be the feeling of opposing camps . . . on one side the class while on the other the teacher" (Buber, 1947, p. 66).

### **KORCZAK'S RESEARCH AS A PRECURSOR TO ACTION AND TEACHER RESEARCH**

Although many books, articles, and conferences have been dedicated to Korczak's life and his legacy, Hartman (1997) points out that the least discussed aspect of Korczak's work is his empirically oriented body of educational theory. Until recently, many researchers evaluated Korczak's work from a positivist perspective. As a result, in spite of their great admiration for his personality and work, they concluded that

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he did not develop an organized scientific system (e.g., Cohen, 1994; Kurzweil, 1968; Simon, 1949). Eden (2000) notes that Korczak lacked the disciplined detachment required of a researcher and that his analysis cannot be generalized because it was subjective and based on a particular group of children. Rather than seeing Korczak's theory as an educational system, he suggests, it should be perceived as a legacy (p. 45).

A new appraisal of Korczak's work has been generated from the shift in the general notions about educational research and the growing adaptation of interpretative approach to inquiry. Binczycka (1997) states that Korczak's statements about the child that were based on empirical studies, as well as on his intuition of an artist, led him "to pursue trends of thought which are becoming fully fledged only now" (p. 129). Hartman (1997) and Reshef (1979) claim that Korczak, loyal to his perception of the educator as a knowledge producer rather than a prescriptive teacher, deliberately did not develop an all-purpose system and preferred to highlight an attitude toward research that serves as a starting point for teachers' own reflections and practice. Several Korczak scholars (e.g., Bauman, 2003; Mencwel, 2003; Wojnowska, 2001) highlight the dialogical nature of Korczak's research and his belief that truth can be born only through conversation between the participants of the didactic process. Wojnowska (2001) states that the characteristic feature of Korczak's dialogue is "being true to one's uniqueness, to one's spiritual biography, and self-knowledge for the sake of joint experiencing and joint action with the multiple 'I' of others" (p. 136). Beiner (1997) points out that Korczak incorporated the empirical analytic, the historic hermeneutic, and the critical emancipatory inquiry methods. He suggests that Korczak used research methods that resemble the current action research.

Action research in education is a form of self-reflective and systematic inquiry undertaken by participants in order to improve their educational practices, as well as their understanding of these practices (Kemmis & McTaggart, 1998). Although the term "action research" is gener-

ally associated with the academic social science tradition, the term "teacher research" or "practitioner research" places teachers or other professionals in the school setting at the center of inquiry and knowledge production (Anderson, Herr, & Nihlen, 1994). The concept of teacher as researcher is usually traced to John Dewey (1929), who argued that teachers should interrogate their own practice. Kurt Lewin (1948) is credited for coining the term *action research* and developing the theory behind it in the 1940s. Stephen Corey introduced action research into education and became its chief advocate (Kemmis, 1981). However, by the end of the 1950s as the separation of theory and practice was emphasized again, action research was pushed into the background of top-down, nationally funded, expert-designed curriculum (Kemmis, 1981; McKernan, 1991). Action research reemerged in Great Britain as teacher research through the work of Lawrence Stenhouse and John Eliot (McKernan, 1991). In the United States, since the 1980s the teacher research movement has aligned itself with the attempt to redefine teacher professionalism (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1999b; Noffke, 1997).

The term "action research," or "practitioner research," was not known in Korczak's time, nor was Korczak part of its "official" narrative. However, even though Korczak did not use the term "practitioner research," he was one of the first educators to implement and promote the idea of the teacher as an action researcher. His concept of education research was not born out of ideological or philosophical perspectives but as a tool to improve education in the interest of children. Being a practitioner himself, he understood that educators are at the heart of reform in education and can be the driving force for change. Being a humanist, he believed in the uniqueness of each child and the particular historical, social, cultural, and political context of each setting (Mencwel, 2003). The combination of these two characteristics led Korczak to the conclusion that a coercive authority or remote, impersonal theory cannot rule over the knowledge and understanding of the educator. He understood that the teacher, who is an autonomous thinker and a lifelong inquirer, has the

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best opportunities to gain insight into the subjective world of the child, make decisions, and take responsibility for the results. To that end, educators should perceive themselves as knowledge seekers, invest in self-development, conceptualize questions based on their practice, investigate their setting, and develop their practical theory for change and growth (Anderson, Herr, & Nihlen, 1994; Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1993, 1999a, Jungck, 2001; Zeichner & Noffke, 2001).

Korczak's vision of teachers as creators of knowledge is still not shared by all. Critics (Fenstermacher, 1994; Huberman, 1996; Labaree, 2003) question the validity of teacher inquiry and its contribution to the educational knowledge base. Fenstermacher (1994) distinguishes between formal, scientific, and theoretical knowledge and practical knowledge that is limited to local context and therefore not of equal value. Huberman (1996) doubts whether teacher inquiry should be considered research at all, as teachers do not have the required "analytical, intellectual, theoretical and universalistic orientations of the researcher" (Labaree, 2003, p. 21).

Korczak, it seems, anticipated this "new paradigm war" (Anderson & Herr, 1999, p. 12) and its denial of the teacher research's legitimacy under the banner of distinction between theory and practice, researcher and practitioner, knower and doer, expert and executer (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1999b). This rejection, he believed, is born out of a false epistemological dichotomy.

Those who see divergence between theory and practice . . . don't have to learn any more from books and fonts, but instead, from life; they do not lack formulae, but rather the toilsomely acquired moral strength to sense the truth, to acquaint themselves with the truth of theory. (Korczak, 2001, p. 50)

Theory, practice, and inquiry, according to Korczak, are embedded within each other and create a richer conception of practice as both practical and theoretical. He regarded educators as knowers: knowers of themselves, knowers of their students, context, and subjects, and knowers of teaching and learning (Connelly & Clandinin, 2000). For practitioner-

researchers, inquiry serves as a vehicle to improve their practice by forming and reformulating their theories about ways to do so.

As with Korczak, teacher researchers today challenge the traditional distinction between formal and practical knowledge and its underlying hierarchical assumptions (e.g., Anderson & Herr, 1999; Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1993, 1998, 1999b; Noffke, 1997; Zeichner & Noffke, 2001). Cochran-Smith and Lytle (1999a) propose an alternative perception of knowledge for teaching, captured in the construct "inquiry as stance." This recognizes the distinctiveness and importance of teachers' ways of knowing and offers new relationships between theory and practice (Cochran Smith & Lytle, 1993, 1999a). Similar to Korczak's insights, "inquiry as stance" values the theories generated by teachers across their professional life span in cultural settings of inquiry and calls for recentering teacher voice through inquiry (Connelly & Clandinin, 2000) and widens the teacher's role to include school leadership, decision making, and policy enactment. From this perspective, the debate about teacher knowledge and teacher inquiry is more than an epistemological discussion, it is rather about a change in the teacher's role that challenges educators, schools of education, and policy makers (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1993, 1999a; Darling-Hammond, 1997; Elliot, 1991; Noffke, 1997; Zeichner & Noffke, 2001).

Korczak teaches us that it is the educator's professional obligation to continuously improve and grow professionally in order to become a force of change and a leader in the struggle to improve children's lives and futures. His voice resonates in the current calls to schools of education to respect and nurture through inquiry the intellectual and leadership capacity among preservice and inservice teachers (Anderson & Herr, 1999; Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1999a; Cooper & McIntyre, 1996; Zeichner, 2003) and reinforce the charge to view teachers as active partners in constructing and implementing consequential changes in the direction, goals, and processes of school and schooling (Anderson et al., 1994; Cochran-Smith, 2001; Darling-Hammond, 1998).

## Final Thoughts

Alexander (2003) argues that educational research study should not be restricted to contemporary practice and that we can and should learn from past educators whose thoughts and actions speak to practitioner-researchers today “across the boundaries of time, place and contemporary life” (p. 385). Korczak’s life experience, practical ideas, and vision about research should not belong solely to the history of education and should not “only be explicated for its own sake but to inspire educators to regenerate and rejuvenate their current practice” (Alexander, 2003, p. 386).

Korczak’s thoughts and actions embody the integration of a far-sighted vision with a practical knowledge and have a timeless importance that can serve as an inspiration for current teachers. He offers a new direction of operating in a sphere of professional challenge and growth that perceives uncertainties and questions not as a threat, but rather as a source for creative rejuvenation, a welcomed chance to struggle and grow. He urges teachers to recognize how their insights, beliefs, and values inform their actions and to systematically research their own practice as an entry to a deeper understanding of their students and their own theories of practice.

Korczak respected the concreteness of each educational setting and the nontransferable responsibility of the teacher to create an educational environment that is best for the student’s present and future life, in contrast to uniform solutions based on standards and high-stakes testing that dismisses teachers’ personal theories and educational visions. Korczak’s vision of teachers as activists who systematically and critically examine the means and goals of reform and change presents a fresh and moral message that is valuable. This is especially important today as we face the current attempts to deskill teachers and present educational problems as technical or procedural issues to be solved by state-mandated guidelines and “university experts.”

Korczak saw teachers as thoughtful men and women of action who are driven by their respect for the endless challenges a child presents, and

he called on teachers to take a moral stand on how to serve the child’s best interests. Practitioner research allows teachers to spread their wings and dream of possibilities. In it “lie the seeds from which forest and cornfield grow, they contain drops which become springs—this is what I offer to sustain, to quench the thirst, to please the heart and fight weariness” (Korczak, 1919/1967a, p. 6). Korczak, a pragmatic dreamer, was ahead of his time and in many ways ahead of our time as well.

## NOTES

1. Korczak wrote in Polish. Most of his literary and pedagogic writings have been translated into Hebrew. Several of his pedagogic writings have been translated into English by Bacharach (Korczak, 1919/1967a, 1914/1967b) and Kulawiec (Korczak, 1979, 1992a, 1992b). Several articles can be found in *Dialogue and Universalism* (2001, pp. 9-10). Although I mostly used works that were translated into English, where the references could not be found in English (his letters to friends, lectures, and short children stories), I relied on the Hebrew translation.

2. Books in English about Korczak’s work and life include Bernheim (1989), Cohen (1994), and Lifton (1988). *Dialogue and Universalism* has devoted two double issues to Korczak: 1997, Vol. 7, No. 9-10, and 2001, Vol. 11, No. 9-10, as well as 2003, Vol. 13, No. 6.

3. According to the editors and translators in the introduction of “Pedagogical Moments” (Korczak, 1996, p. 347).

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