

Anno XIII, Numero 40
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**INFANZIA, AUTOBIOGRAFIA E TRADIZIONE
NEL PENSIERO E NELL'OPERA EDUCATIVA
DI JANUSZ KORCZAK**

**CHILDHOOD, AUTOBIOGRAPHY AND TRADITION
IN JANUSZ KORCZAK'S THOUGHT
AND EDUCATIONAL WORK**

Centro per la Qualità dell'Insegnamento, dell'Innovazione didattica
e dell'Apprendimento



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Aspetti pedagogici nell'opera di Janusz Korczak

Pedagogical Aspects in the Work of Janusz Korczak

ANDREA POTESTIO

This essay reflects on the pedagogical aspects pertaining to the work of the Polish educator Janusz Korczak, focusing in particular on an analysis of his original texts in Italian which were recently published by Studium. The particular attention to childhood and the circularity between theory and practice are significant aspects of his theoretical production.

KEYWORDS: EDUCATION; JANUSZ KORCZAK; CHILDREN; PEDAGOGY; LIFE.

Korczak's thought reflects his incessant, passionate activity of child education and care, particularly for the weakest, poorest, most defenceless, orphaned children. Starting with his work as a paediatrician, his experiences as a young educator for associations concerning orphans, up to his direction of the orphanage starting in 1912 and collaboration in designing the educational project of our orphanage starting in 1919, Henryk Goldszmit¹ dedicated his entire life to educating and helping children in difficulties, choosing not to have a family or children². As constantly recalled by a reception – at least in Italy – that is too celebratory and worshipful, this decision would lead him to sacrifice his own life in the Treblinka extermination camp, following the destiny of the children he dealt with in the Jewish ghetto of Warsaw.

The decision to dedicate his life to children and to tell about their world, particularly for those who are most marginalized, constituted the foci through which Korczak showed his passion about education and development. He observed children, cared for them as a doctor, recognized and cared for their needs, and over the years, this daily professional practice became a life choice and educational service that took shape in the orphanage. This intense educational work in the field was not, however, the only way in which the Polish doctor dealt with

children. Ever since he was young, still a medical student, Janusz wrote stories and biographies about children and their living conditions³. Writing is what completes Korczak's educational actions. Through writing, the young medical student recognized his passion for children, the educator described and made a problem out of the strategies used at the orphanage, and the old doctor reflected on the condition of children and the last years of his life. It can be seen that writing accompanied the Polish educator's entire life and completed his educational efforts as developmental practice⁴. Is it also true that Korczak's work, although fragmentary and in his particular style, constitutes a system of pedagogical reflections? Could we say that the extraordinary life of Korczak the educator has also offered a pedagogical theory that, although not systematic, presents points of interest and modernity?

It is not easy to answer this question exhaustively and without hesitation, even though the recent publications of original writings published by Studium offers readers starting points and reflections for expanding on the topic that, in this essay, we aim to call 'implicit' pedagogy⁵. The basis of what we aim to call 'implicit' pedagogy in Korczak is his attempt - at times obsessive and illusory - to narrate the mystery of infancy and youth. In the story *Bobo*, this narrative takes the form of a nearly impossible effort to describe the first days of an infant's life. In *Una settimana sfortunata* it becomes the description of the unhappy events of a young student at school. In *La confessione di una farfalla*, it solidifies in the passionate torment of an adolescent and in *Momenti educativi* and *Pedagogia scherzosa*, it is presented as reflections on episodes of education and teaching, either experienced or imagined.

It is certainly not easy to find a common thread in these real or invented episodes that sprinkle the pages of Korczak's writing. And yet, it is clear that in his major writings, a given idea of infancy and childhood that not without risks and illusions⁶ becomes an object of study, observation, and perhaps pedagogical analysis. We aim to investigate which aspects and pedagogical meanings are present, even implicitly, in his ways of narrating the mystery of infancy and youth.

"Implicit" pedagogy as observation and narration about children

Every time, setting aside the book, I would begin to disentangle your ideas, the book would have reached the end proposed. If I quickly leafed through to look for

prescriptions and recipes, complaining because there are very few, I knew you would refer to advice and indications, which occurs not thanks to, but against the author's will⁷.

In this step, Korczak's perspective when writing about educational issues shines through clearly. Directing himself directly to readers and echoing many authors in the pedagogical tradition of Locke, Rousseau, and Pestalozzi, he warns that the text does not contain recipes or advice for those who want to educate, but rather starting points and stimuli which the attentive reader, through reflection and a developmental process, can use to investigate and expand on the intentions and strategies. Education does not simply coincide with care, meeting the physical and psychological needs of the student, or solving a problem and healing⁸. Although he was a doctor and provided a series of indications on the nutrition and care of children that derive from direct observation, Korczak was aware that educational processes move in a dimension different to that of medicine. Reacting to the spread of an excessively positivist atmosphere that is too focused on measuring and controlling children's progress, following in the wake of Pestalozzi⁹ and some great educators such as his contemporary Montessori, the Polish educator presents a perspective aware of the individual characteristics of each child and capable of respecting and loving the array of aptitudes and mysteries with attention and prudence. This is why it is not possible to provide recipes, but rather recount the different types of capabilities that pertain to infancy, describing situations and educational actions that cannot be measured, but which make aspects, potential, emotions, and meanings emerge that may be useful for the reader and are in turn capable of inventing educational strategies that can always be perfected.

The analysis of the previous citation helps to formulate an initial response to the question of the existence of an 'implicit' pedagogy in Korczak's texts. We could say that his writings contain a pedagogical stance, i.e. an awareness, albeit not explicit, that the object of study, knowledge that reflects on education, is complex. As well, since it involves at least two human beings (teacher and pupil), it cannot be grasped and defined fully and completely. It is not within the scope of these pages to reconstruct, even as a summary, the ample, wide-ranging debate on the epistemological nature of pedagogy. Rather, we limit ourselves to observing that, already in its name, this knowledge shows a difference with respect to other human sciences such as psychology, anthropology, and sociology, which are characterized as studies on determined aspects of reality. Bertagna states:

In fact, [pedagogy], as is known, comes from *pais*, son, daughter, or from *paidos*, growing, evolving human subject, plus *agogé*, from *agein*, from the Greek verb 'to lead, guide, but ascending as in a spiral', in the sense of moving and making someone move from an inferior state to a higher one, making the person express a potential, whether shown or unexpressed (possibility) and actively enhancing it to make the person better¹⁰.

Pedagogy does not study education or development; the goal is not to measure or describe a process. Rather, it is knowledge that always investigates subjects in education and development, that is, the changes that allow the teacher and student to improve and manifest unexpressed potential through educational and developmental relationships. Therefore, pedagogical knowledge is ideographic. It always regards the singularity in question and shies away from recipes and universal norms that, despite concrete experience, expect to be abstractly applied to the entire reality. In this deeper meaning, the perspective of Korczak's writings – the reflections, stories, description of events, correspondence – is pedagogical because it aims to tell about situations, opportunities, and moments that investigate the tension present in educational and developmental relationships, starting from his experience as an educator. At the same time, this is also because he was aware that it is not possible to generate a universal principle starting from the observation of an event. There are many ways to love, respect, and educate children, and they cannot be encompassed by standards and precepts valid under every condition and applied mechanically.

There is another aspect that characterizes what we could call 'implicit' pedagogy in Korczak's writing: the fact that the object of study in his work is children (youths) in every respect. In other words, children in their concreteness and singularity, not as a social phenomenon, an idea that crosses society, or a quantitative element:

I feel responsible for children; I would like to be useful to them because I have dedicated a lifetime of study to them and not just because I leave the world in a state of general confusion. It was not enough not knowing how to defend children; I did not even find an ear that wanted to listen to solutions that – perhaps I delude myself – I had found¹¹.

The children represent his passion and are the object of study in his reflections and pedagogical stories. This is not a general idea of children – which even for Korczak exists and orients his activities – but rather images and figures of real children he cared for and towards whom he felt an increasing responsibility.

The narrations and reflections that constitute what we call here Korczak's 'implicit' pedagogy possess an epistemological pedagogical dimension because they study the singularity of children and youths and their changes. It is the person who is developing, being educated, that is the protagonist of Korczak's writings that are found in this volume. The educational process he speaks of – even in the most imaginative moments of *Pedagogia scherzosa* – grow out of his experiences in education, direct contact with children, the concrete relationship between teacher and pupil, and the living difficulties that children are forced to experience. His intention was not to describe a process or gather the social, economic, or historical characteristics of infancy in Poland in the early 1900s. Instead, Korczak aimed to recount the experience of each individual child he encountered, penetrate his or her mysteries and show the reader the transformations invoked by educational relationships. Loving children means talking about them, displaying their needs, characteristics, and desires, considering them as a particular object of study that, precisely because each is different from all others, they cannot be measured, controlled, and fully understood, but must be respected for characteristics and what they can do in the present:

respect for the minutes of the present. How will they know how to handle things tomorrow if we prevent them from living a responsible life today? Not trampling or humiliating children, not making them slaves of tomorrow; letting them live without discouraging, mistreating, or hurrying them. Respect for each minute that passes, because it will die and never return. A wounded minute will begin to bleed; a minute that has been killed will come back and haunt your nights¹².

Respecting infancy also means considering it as a stage of life with its own identity and characteristics. Echoing the reflections of many authors in the tradition of pedagogy, Korczak underlines the need to observe, investigate, and educate children for the humans they are in the present and not for who they should become in the future as adults:

the educator is not held to assume the responsibility of a distant future, but is completely responsible in the present day. [...] It is easier to transfer responsibility to tomorrow, confine it to an indistinct tomorrow rather than to today, rather than asking for an account at every hour of the present. Educators must certainly and indirectly provide an answer to society for tomorrow, but must above all answer for the student in the present. It is too easy to shift the child's present to another plane in the name of a gaudy slogan for tomorrow. Working for morality means cultivating what is good. Cultivating the good that

already exists, despite the vices, defects, people's innate bad instincts, which already exist¹³.

Infancy and youth have particular characteristics that educators must observe, recognize, and study. The goal of education is to use useful experiences in the present that can arouse the interest of children to make them display their still unexpressed potential. In fact, there is no sense in sacrificing the present with useless activities that are mechanical and incomprehensible for children in view of what one assumes may be useful in their future as adults.

Respect for and the study of infancy and youth led the Polish educator to use two interwoven strategies that characterize his practice and reflections: observation and narration. The importance of observation grew out of his medical practice, the need to grasp the different manifestations of symptoms of illnesses and the awareness that the same pathologies may present themselves in different ways in different children. From the beginning, his practice of paediatric observation was interwoven with an educational sensitivity that pushed him not only to cure the different illness, but also to understand the needs, characteristics, and potential of children and to address the desires that constitute their integrity:

the unforgettable image of a dormitory waking up. A glance, slow gestures, or a nice decided jump down from the bed. One rubs his eyes, another dries the corners of her mouth with the sleeve of a nightgown, one rubs his ear, stretches, remains still with a piece of clothing in his hand, a fixed gaze. Lively, impassive, agile, fidgety, confident, fearful, precise, overlooked, well aware, or bewildered. These are true tests. The type of child is immediately clear and why he or she always does the same or does so today in particular¹⁴.

Close observation of a dormitory waking up provides an infinite series of information about children, their predispositions, ways of facing the day, and repeated or anomalous behaviours that may be a symptom of discomfort. Knowing how to see, observing the characteristics of children means beginning to understand them, approaching them with prudence and respect and reflecting on the educational action to take. In Korczak's language, it basically means loving them. The intertwining of observation and narration is also clear from the quote above. For the Polish educator, observation is never detached from writing, which stems from the memory of what was observed. It is not by chance that the pages of *Diario del Ghetto* that recount the children waking up at the orphanage are the result of sleepless nights spent writing and time spent observing the children at

'his' orphanage in depth. Writing is the main way Korczak told about what he observed, setting down reflections, emotions, aspects of real life, habits, and the characteristics of children. It is precisely this cycle between observation and narration that generated developmental reflection, which was necessary for designing, orienting, and at times modifying the educational strategies he suggested and implemented.

And not only that. Korczak's observation was not limited to seeing what is present, that is, the characteristics and habits of children he studied, but he set the goal of anticipating reality and grasping what is still not visible, as seems to emerge in the meaningful page of *Come amare il bambino* on the observational capacity of attentive mothers:

the mother noted what I, the doctor, could not read in the course of the brief visit. She spent hours bent over the little one, without an observational method, but she knew what she had noted, yet not trusting herself, she did not have the courage to confess her acute observations. But she noted that the child was hoarse, with a less clear voice. Lallation was less frequent and more subdued. Once the child jumped in his sleep more strongly than usual. Upon waking up he smiled, but more weakly [...]. With a hundred symptoms noticed by the mother's eye, her ear, her breast, with a hundred micro reports, he had said "I'm bothered. Today I'm not myself"¹⁵.

When rearing children, the attentive mother embodies the capacity to observe educationally, gathering even what is still not visible to the eyes and initiating a deep process of understanding the child.

Beyond the episode relating to the emergence of a pathology reported by Korczak, it is the maternal nature of observation that is already shown as a part of the educational relationship. This does not mean observing with a technical method to describe, measure, and define, but educational observation is already a process of approaching children, which, leading to a relationship, also allows what exists to be transformed and to manifest what is still only potential, both in the one being observed and in the observer. In another context, Bertolini and Caronia argued:

observation [...] is not configured as 'standing and looking', but rather 'living with'. This is not an aseptic practice based on separation and disengagement of the educator, but rather involves the need to put oneself in the shoes of the other as a fundamental aspect; it is immediately presented as a moment of relating and communicating¹⁶.

It is clear that for Korczak, observation constituted an essential moment in his educational technique, as shown by the fact that each of his reflections arose from 'living with' children and his interest in understanding their point of view. It is necessary to underline that in Korczak's work and practice, relational observation intertwines with narrative energy. Observing means recounting the range of aspects that the educator can see, like the children waking up in the dormitory, but also emotions, desires, and dimensions of infancy that are still not visible or which may only be imagined. It is not by chance that *Bobo*, *Una settimana sfortunata*, and even different events in *Momenti educative* - which are contained in this volume - narrate the perspective of children and youths who find themselves facing the difficulties of life. Korczak the author built characters starting from observation, he imagined exemplary events, and aimed to rebuild the children's point of view, their world, emotions, ways of understanding life and interacting with others¹⁷. Through the potential of literature, this attempt at deep understanding is pushed to the maximum in *Bobo*, trying to give a voice to the still unformed identify of a new-born.

These considerations allow us to answer a question we have still not formulated, but which emerges in the frugality of the present introduction: Why speak about 'implicit' pedagogy in Korczak's work and in this volume? Is there no explicit pedagogy based on the ideographic dimension, on observation and narration? The thesis presented in these pages - which seems to be well supported by the texts presented to the public in this volume - is that the ideographic energy in Korczak's view, the privilege he assigned to educational practice and his attempt to recount the mysteries of children manifested itself in literary narrative writing that renounces argumentative thought (whether intentionally or unintentionally). Korczak does not discuss the role of observation, his anthropological view, the narrative means he uses, nor does he build a pedagogical argument around these aspects. Instead, he uses these issues in the way in which he tells about infancy and children and makes them emerge implicitly and without a declared argument in the figures of children and youths he presents to readers, as well as in the aphoristic, non-systematic reflections he presents.

The anthropological dimension and interweaving between theory and practice

A child is a parchment densely covered with minute hieroglyphics, of which you can decipher only a part; some you will erase completely, others you will blur a little and fill with your own content. A terrible law. No, beautiful. It establishes in each child the first link in an immortal chain of generations. It looks for that particle of you that lives within, latent, that particle which pertains to you. Perhaps you will glimpse it, perhaps you will make it emerge and develop¹⁸.

The image of a child as a parchment evokes the reading of sacred Hebrew texts. Children recall a sacred dimension, something that approaches the origin, the Creator, and the first link of generations. Even if Korczak pertained to a family of integrated Polish Jews¹⁹, the Jewish religious culture influenced his development and his vision of people and children. For our argument, the image of a child as a parchment highlights two important aspects that characterize Korczak's work. The first is the analogy between children and the pure origin of humanity that at times leads to slipping towards an idea of illusion and purity. The second regards the fact that, as with each sacred text, it is necessary to interpret written signs, which may sometimes generate misunderstanding and incomprehension. That is, the educator whose task it is to decipher the mystery of the individual child cannot grasp the essence, at times does not recognize any potential, or even replaces it with orders, conventions, and standards far from the pupil's characteristics.

And not only that. So that an educational process can become a true 'relational dance', the educator must be trained, that is, discover the child-like particle that lies within, its still latent, spring-like essence. Hence in its completeness, the educational process must transform both individuals involved. The pure, still latent, spring-like aspect of the child acts on the teacher's reflection, actions, and also subjective identity – as occurs with Korczak through writing – generating a process that modifies and changes the participants for the better.

Starting from the citation above, these considerations on education and the idea of children allow us to identify another necessary issue for what we call 'implicit' pedagogy in Korczak's writing: the anthropological vision. While without becoming a focus or object of specific argumentation, the pages of his work show an anthropology with positive aspects that become an essential ontological for suggesting educational and developmental processes. We are very distant from the

theories of Rousseau, who, at the beginning of *Émile* states the principle of the original goodness of man²⁰ and those of Pestalozzi, who reflects, although with some fluctuation, on the nature of man²¹. And yet, the idea of infancy that Korczak presents in his writings does not coincide only with a phase of life, with given characteristics and potential. Rather, it also represents a sort of limiting idea that pertains to humanity and recalls it with its origin. For the educator, loving children also means discovering or rediscovering a positive, original energy that ties the educator to life, to what is not contaminated by injustice and oppression. «When I speak or play with children, an instant of my life combines with an instant of theirs and these two instants have the same maturity»²². Herein lies the educational circularity between teacher and pupil that allows educators, through emotions and relationships with children, to recognize their own childhood and approach the deepest dimension of their own nature while pushing the child to make contact with aspects that are still latent. This educational and self-developmental aspect that Korczak seems to theorize should not be interpreted as negating the asymmetry between teacher and educator, but as the ability to make a positive horizon pertaining to the nature of humans emerge amid the ascending relationship between the two. This is a horizon that standards, bad habits of the world of adults and school easily tend to not recognize and to scorn: «not trampling or humiliating children, not making them slaves of tomorrow; letting them live without discouraging, mistreating, or hurrying them»²³.

The positive view of children may be interpreted as an anthropology that pertains and underlies all of Korczak's reflections although without being a focus²⁴. Respecting and loving children does not constitute just a goal that orients his educational activities, but also necessary acts of self-development, which each person (educator) should make to recognize and enhance a deep, hidden part of himself or herself²⁵. A part of the person that does not coincide only with the biological age of infancy or youth, but which indicates an energy, which can never fully be governed, that allows people to change and improve, overcoming the negativity of social standards and rules:

Children offer experience, influence my point of view and the world of my awareness. It is from children that I find advice that is useful for myself; they are the point of reference with which I set goals, I control myself, I expect more of myself, I complain about myself, I manage to understand a question or to pardon. Children teach and educate²⁶.

This is why Korczak's narration aims to explore the child's perspective as much as possible, trying to identify themselves in him and their way of perceiving existence. This is a way of perceiving reality that, if carried at least partially into adult life, may lead to improvements in building social ties and reducing injustice, conflicts, and violence. This concept of children and people is not free of illusions or ingenuity – as we have previously underlined – starting with the ideal of purity that at times risks becoming pedagogical perspective, an exaltation of spontaneity and the adoption of celebratory rhetoric of a given human age²⁷.

The idea of infancy/childhood as a positive spark of humanity – which we suggest as a characteristic element of Korczak's anthropology – becomes a fleeting but fully definable element. It does not fully correspond to a biological age, nor can it even be considered a principle or ontological basis given the lack of a theory in the work of the Polish educator and his constant fluctuations. And yet this idea of infancy understood as energy that crosses human existence operates in Korczak's writing, indicating a series of emotional/sentimental aspects and an orientation that can guide educational activity through the educator's inventive capability. It is no coincidence that the children the Polish educator dealt with were orphans, that is, without parents, ties, or social references²⁸, but also free of identifying, subjective characteristics that would have needed to be rebuilt through the educational process:

Each evil in history was reconciled either directly with children, killing them since they are weak and defenceless, or indirectly, by killing or making the parents disappear. I repeat: I promised myself to concentrate on children. Entirely unexpectedly, I found the orphan²⁹.

The orphan's condition best represents the Polish educator's vision of children for at least two reasons that are worthy of investigation. The first is the most evident. It consists of social criticism and the verification that there are many – too many – children without parents due to wars, violence, or the poor economic and unhygienic/unsanitary conditions of society. This is why Korczak, who aimed to accompany and guide the children through education, found himself dealing with orphans forced to live without anyone to help them. The second regards the fact that the orphan's condition indicates the child's general lack, the mystery of a human being that, when growing, lacks everything, is needy, without roots: «a condition that cannot be compensated with anything, children built their world on the edge of a tomb or multiple tombs»³⁰.

The idea of an orphan, even more than the idea of a child, embodies the principle that Korczak used to build his narratives and educational activities. Orphans recall a representation of children as something that is constitutionally lacking, elusive, and mysterious. This lack indicates the task of education, its purposes and intentional acts that aim to fill it, but it also shows the limits of educational activity, the awareness that it is necessary to build prudently, without expecting to completely fill in what is lacking, perhaps imposing the violent habits and standards of adults. Starting from his recognition of the child-orphan, Korczak's narration is an attempt to not exceed a limit and to allow the idea of child-orphan to be procreative, even in each person's adult life.

Although implicit in the reflections of the Polish educator, the vision of the person based on the idea of child-orphan as a glimmer of humanity also allows us to better understand the meaning that experience, the concrete dimension, and constant circularity between practice and theory assume in his argumentation. The act of education cannot help starting from what is experienced through emotion, feeling, needs, and the experiences of each pupil:

through theory, I know; through practice, I feel. Theory enriches the intellect, practice sharpens sensitivity and trains the strength of willingness. Knowing does not mean acting based on what one knows. Other points of view may penetrate me, the life of my 'id'. It is not without making a strict selection that I adhere to the vast field of theoretical statements. I reject some, forget others; others still I overlook, underestimate. Thus, I build my array of knowledge, whether conscious or unconscious, which I let guide me in practical activity [...] Practice is my past, my life, the personal sum of my experiences, the awareness of my failures, my work, my victories and defeats, my emotions³¹.

The circularity between theory and practice allows for education and development, aiming to make the 'child' emerge, not only with rationality and the word; the child that constitutes each human being, that is, an original, unusual dimension of perceiving and experiencing reality. This inexhaustible process starts with the experience of each pupil and solidifies, through the educator's prudent support, in reflections, narratives, changes, and conscious actions that lead each human to find his or her own way of interpreting existence³².

The anthropology that operates in Korczak's work, albeit indirectly and implicitly, is based in the particular means of interpreting Hebrew culture without orthodoxies and aphoristically reading past and present pedagogical literature. This view of people allows Korczak's stories to show a lively, concrete energy that pushes towards educational activity, towards the transformation of what exists

and the construction of a pedagogy as a form of art capable of telling about the integral nature of human beings.

ANDREA POTESIO
University of Bergamo

¹ Henryk Goldszmit is the real name of the Polish educator, who was born in 1878 (or 1879) into an affluent Jewish-Polish family well inserted in the cultural context of the time.

² In his autobiographical reflections, Korczak recalls the moment he decided not to have a family or children. See the letter to Mieczysław Zylbertal dated 30 March 1937, in J. Korczak, *Lettere e altri scritti*, vol. I, Studium, Rome 2022, pp. 117–120.

³ In 1900, together with the poet and ethnographer, Ludwik Licinski, he wrote an account of children's living conditions in the poor quarters of Warsaw entitled *La miseria di Varsavia*. That same year, the magazine «Viaggiatore» published a series of seven articles by Korczak on *Bambini ed educazione*.

⁴ On the distinction between education and development, see the reflection by G. Bertagna, *Tra educazione e formazione: plaidoyer per una distinzione nell'unità*, in Id. (ed.), *Educazione e formazione. Sinonimie, analogie, differenze*, Studium, Rome 2018, pp. 89–128.

⁵ See: J. Korczak, *Lettere e altri scritti*, cit. e id., *Racconti e scritti educativi*, vol. II, Studium, Rome 2022.

⁶ On the illusions present in the idea of infancy that Korczak elaborates on, refer to A. Potesio, *Introduzione. Il valore autobiografico nell'idea di in-fanzia di J. Korczak*, in J. Korczak, *Lettere e altri scritti*, vol. I, cit., pp. 13–38.

⁷ J. Korczak, *Come amare il bambino* (1918), Luni, Milan 2018, p. 17.

⁸ On the issue of educational care distinguished from simple support, rearing, and training, see, for example, amid the ample Italian literature: R. Fadda, *La cura, la forma, il rischio. Percorsi di psichiatria e pedagogia critica*, Unicopli, Milan 1997; I. Lizzola, *Aver cura della vita. L'educazione nella prova: sofferenza, il congedo, il nuovo inizio*, Città aperta, Enna 2005; A. Potesio, F. Togni, *Bisogno di cura e desiderio di educazione*, La Scuola, Brescia 2011.

⁹ Although it is not easy to reconstruct Korczak's sources and pedagogical readings, Pestalozzi is certainly one thinker that most influenced the development of the Polish educator. In fact, in 1901 Korczak travelled to Zurich to investigate the issues of his thought and educational activities.

¹⁰ G. Bertagna, *La pedagogia e le 'scienze dell'educazione e/o della formazione'. Per un paradigma epistemologico*, in id. (ed.), *Educazione e formazione. Sinonimie, analogie, differenze*, cit., p. 26.

¹¹ J. Korczak, *Lettera a Mieczysław Zylbertal*, 23 May 1937, in Id., *Lettere e altri scritti*, vol. I, cit., p. 126. [Tutte le traduzioni in inglese dei passi di Korczak sono dell'autore].

¹² Id., *Il diritto del bambino al rispetto* (1929), Luni editrice, Milan 2004, pp. 59–60.

¹³ Id., *Teoria e pratica*, in Id., *Racconti e scritti educativi*, vol. II, cit., pp. 154–155.

¹⁴ Id., *Diario del ghetto* (1942), Luni editrice, Milan 2019, p. 33.

¹⁵ Id., *Come amare il bambino* (1918), cit., p. 31.

¹⁶ P. Bertolini, L. Caronia, *Ragazzi difficili. Pedagogia interpretativa e linee di intervento*, FrancoAngeli, Milan 2015, p. 94.

¹⁷ Korczak had the following to say on his tendency to imagine and construct stories. «I do not know if I believed all that I imagined. But it was amazing to lose myself in those fantasies. At times I even knew if the horse would be bay or black» (J. Korczak, *Quando ridiventerò bambino* (1924), Luni, Milan 2018, p. 10).

¹⁸ Id., *Come amare il bambino* (1918), cit., p. 21.

¹⁹ Korczak (real name Henryk Goldszmit) was born on 22 July 1878 in Warsaw into a Jewish middle-class family that was well integrated in Polish culture. His father was a famous lawyer. While not disowning the Jewish tradition, Janusz's parents did not practice the faith. For more information on the influence of the Jewish tradition in Korczak's work, see C. Tonini, *Janusz Korczak nel contesto storico polacco*, in id. (ed.), *Janusz Korczak. Educatore, letterato, filosofo*, Erickson, Trento 2014, pp. 14–15 and G. Tomassucci, 'Io sono a scacchi'. *L'identità ebraica nell'opera letteraria e teatrale di Janusz Korczak*, «Konteksty Kultury», XIII, 3 (2016), pp. 223–241.

²⁰ The celebrated start of *Emilio* is a statement of the principle of original goodness of humans, which constitutes a primary condition for its pedagogical setting (J.J. Rousseau, *Emilio o dell'educazione* [1762], Studium, Roma 2016, p. 95). He does not mean that focusing on positive anthropology is necessary for building a pedagogical system – pedagogical reflections may also be developed using negative anthropological views like Hobbes' – but a pedagogy cannot be built without an anthropology of reference. In Korczak's case, his idea of infancy – very implicit and not theorized – constituted the positive spark that oriented strategies and educational reflections. It is worth noting that Korczak criticized Rousseau's principle of natural goodness, even influencing his reflection: «Rousseau starts Emilio with a sentence entirely contradicted by contemporary genetics» (J. Korczak, *Come amare il bambino* [1918], cit., p. 163).

²¹ Among Pestalozzi's writings, see, in particular J.H. Pestalozzi, *Il canto del cigno* (1826), in E. Becchi (ed.), *Scritti scelti*, UTET, Turin 1970, pp. 555–800.

²² J. Korczak, *Il diritto del bambino al rispetto* (1929), cit., p. 60

²³ *Ibi*, p. 59.

²⁴ A reflection on children's transformational capacity: «because all children want to change, even the worst of them» (Id., *Quando ridiventerò bambino* [1924], cit., p. 105). Or the autobiographical words in *La confessione di una farfalla*: «if you are a pessimist, don't spread the poison of doubt to others. Many people already believe too little in the possibilities and sense of existence. There is no need to forget that even if life is a school of suffering, it holds happy moments worth living for» (Id., *La confessione di una farfalla*, in Id., *Racconti e scritti educativi*, vol. II, cit., p. 25).

²⁵ In this respect, Giuliani states: «For Korczak, each pedagogical project should be self-educational, just like each child-adult relationship (and not only) is and must be a relationship of inter-generational solidarity. Many of the intuitions and educational practices that have become solidified and shared today were not so at all before Korczak and the spread of his work» (L. Giuliani, *Korczak. L'umanesimo a misura di bambino. Storia del pedagogista martire nel lager con i suoi 203 ragazzi*, Il Margine, Trento 2016, p. 20).

²⁶ J. Korczak, *Teoria e pratica*, in *Racconti e scritti educativi*, vol. II, cit., pp. 278–282.

²⁷ The risk of interpreting Korczak's reflections as a non-critical celebration of infancy and childhood mostly resides in the reception of his work that is more aware of emphasizing the old doctor's decision to accompany 'his' children to death than of carefully reading the nuances and even contradictions in his work.

²⁸ The word *orphan* derives from the Latin *ōrphānus*, from the Greek *orphanòs*, from the Sanskrit root *arbh-*, 'little', 'child'. The etymology references the idea of deprivation and lack. The same root gives rise to the Latin term *orbus*, 'lacking'.

²⁹ Id., *La perla della sofferenza* (1927), in Id., *Lettere e altri scritti*, vol. I, cit., p. 192.

³⁰ Id., *Orfani* (1925), in *Ibi*, p. 165.

³¹ Id., *Teoria e pratica*, *supra*, in Id., *Racconti e scritti educativi*, vol. II, cit., p. 278.

³² Suitably, Peticari underlined the importance of circularity between theory and practice in Korczak's work: «the profound dialectic relationship - similar to Hegel we could say - between theory and practice and between practice and theory - for Korczak there is no theory without practice or practice without theory - is blended in this book with an apologetic and poetic style certainly more similar to something by Nietzsche or Aesop than to our current crunchers of theories and pedagogical and didactic acronyms» (P. Peticari, *Prefazione*, in J. Korczak, *Le regole della vita. Pedagogia per giovani e adulti* [1929], Mimesis, Milan 2017, pp. 9–10).