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Democracy begins with children's rights

Demokracja zaczyna się od praw dzieci

STRESZCZENIE: Autor tekstu jest dyrektorem wyjątkowej i unikatowej w świecie inicjatywy corocznych konferencji Children as Actors For Transforming Society (*Dzieci jako aktorzy w zmienianiu społeczeństwa*), która propaguje ideę partycypacji społecznej dzieci na różnych poziomach społecznych, włącznie z politycznym udziałem. Wyjątkowe w formule konferencji CATS gromadzą zwykle kilkaset uczestników: dzieci, młodzież i dorośli z kilkudziesięciu krajów z całego świata. W trakcie konferencji w różnych formach aktywności dzieci i dorośli uczą się możliwości współpracy i współdziałania jako równorzędni partnerzy. Prezentowany tekst jest w swej formule pedagogiczną odezwą Autora. Ukazuje on ideę partycypacji dzieci jako fundamentalny nurt rozwoju demokracji i urzeczywistniania się demokratycznych społeczeństw. Odwołuje się do jej źródeł tkwiących w ideach wielu filozofów, myślicieli i pedagogów oraz wyjaśnia jej znaczenie oraz potrzebę jej urzeczywistniania, a nade wszystko popularyzowania, podobnie jak realizuje to właśnie inicjatywa CATS.

SŁOWA KLUCZOWE: Dzieci, partycypacja dzieci, demokracja, społeczeństwo.

ABSTRACT: The author of this paper is the head and the organizer of a unique and particular initiative of running yearly conferences: Children as Actors for Transforming Society, that promote an idea of civic

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participation of children on many different levels including political participation. Unique in their formula CATS conferences gather hundreds of participants of diverse age from all around the world. During these conferences through different forms of activity adults and children learn to broaden their perspectives and to cooperate as equal partners. Presented paper is author's pedagogical appeal, to show the idea of children's participation as a fundamental path of democratic development and embodiment of democratic societies. It relates to the sources of such ideas in philosophical and pedagogical thoughts to explain their significance and need of their fulfillment and popularization in similar ways to CATS initiative.

KEYWORDS: Children, children's participation, democracy, society.

*An educator who does not enforce but sets free,
Does not drag but uplifts,
Does not crush but shapes,
Does not dictate but instructs
Does not demand but requests,
Will experience truly inspired moments with the child.*
Janusz Korczak

How we treat children determines whether they will grow up to create a just society

Our knowledge has made us cynical; our cleverness, hard and unkind, said Charlie Chaplin. "We think too much and feel too little. More than machinery we need humanity. More than cleverness we need kindness and gentleness. Without these qualities, life will be violent and all will be lost".

At the end of 2014, the Executive Director of UNICEF stated that as many as 15 million children are caught up in violent conflicts in Africa, the Middle East and Ukraine. These include those who have been displaced in their own countries as well as those living as refugees outside their homelands. An estimated 230 million children live in countries affected by armed conflicts.

As an educationalist, my whole adult life has been centred on children. This has taught me that the key issues with which the world is grappling come back to universal values of humanity. These issues include injustice, corruption, undemocratic processes, lack of trust and integrity, conflict and power struggles, racism, cultural intolerance and discrimination. They are important, but they are the symptoms of something deeper, which touches on our relationship to our fellow humans.

Participation is the building block of democracy. It creates active citizens and thriving civil societies. It can hold governments to account

and challenge corruption and undemocratic practices. Where do we teach people that their input is a valuable resource? Our relationship with humanity starts in the womb. Then we are born. During our formative years, we build our understanding of society, first in the family, then at school and through recreational opportunities and our encounters with health centres and social welfare. We learn from our elders' behaviour. We observe whether we are respected or humiliated, whether we are protected, under-protected or over-protected, whether our opinions are taken seriously. We see whether we are enabled to find our unique place in democracy, whether we are thought of as true competent partners. These elements will determine our way of understanding our world and its complexities. They will decide whether we acquire a critical consciousness which allows us to make informed decisions so as to transform ourselves and our society for the better.

Participation matters!

Participation empowers children in their diverse situations to make decisions about the primary issues that affect their lives (growing, learning, loving) and the lives of others and the environment. It is essential for children and young people to develop their own capacities and skills to participate fully in their communities and society.

However, for most children, being heard and respected and having the opportunity to play a meaningful role in issues which affect them is not an option. There is much to be done to mainstream children's participation to ensure that all children are able to realize their right to be heard and have their viewpoints respected. Implementing this right involves a profound and radical change in the status of children in most societies and the nature of relationships between adults and children.

Many thinkers, from Jean-Jacques Rousseau onwards, have pointed out that an upbringing which does not respect the values of democracy (such as choice, decision-making and individual opinions) will not produce a just society. These fundamental elements are nothing more than the rights that we universally promised to the world's children 27 years ago through the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child.

We need to be part of the ongoing struggle to ensure that children can achieve true self awareness despite the tendency of educational systems to stick labels on them, that children should feel a sense of self worth and that what they say has value, so that they can go forward in self confidence. The CATS series of conferences (Children as actors for transforming society) was created

in order unite children and adults in a mission to foster each child's unique potential, for this to unfold and flourish within the context of a particular community and society. Through our engagement in this mission, we are continuing certain pedagogical currents that were relegated to the margins of mainstream pedagogy. The historical milestone – a hundred years ago – of what was then called the Great War sparked off widespread shock and horror at its atrocities, accompanied by a fervent wish that children be spared any recurrence and that they could instead enjoy a positive future. A greater emphasis on what we now call 'well-being' – and how to achieve this through learning and pedagogy – meant that in the 1920s people listened with more attention than before to what thinkers like Janusz Korczak, Maria Montessori, John Dewey, Celestin Freinet and Rudolph Steiner and many more had to say. And what were they saying? In their different ways, these pedagogues put forward ideas that continues to articulate today – that every child is a person in his or her own right, that participatory democracy is founded on recognition of this, that education must address the wholeness within a child rather than concentrate on developing only the mental faculties... and much more. While the word 'well-being' was not used, an idea was recognizably present that the desired outcome of education was the feeling of 'being well' as a whole person. These ideas can be traced back to Jean-Jacques Rousseau at the time of the European Enlightenment. Rousseau published *Emile* in the same year 1762 that *The Social Contract* was. *Emile* challenged medieval thinking that children were unfinished beings who were objects of correction, and Rousseau argued instead that children were fully formed persons and that childhood should be recognized as a state of being. Both books prepared the way for the French Revolution with their political and pedagogical arguments for democracy and their demonstration that education and democracy are mutually interdependent. However, Voltaire's scathing critique of both books prevailed, and later Napoleon was to move education and pedagogy in France towards standardization and away from the recognition of difference that Rousseau urged – and this was one reason why reformers like Froebel and Pestalozzi found it difficult to engage with the educational system in France.

Arguments for standardization continue to dominate debates on education today, as many of us know from personal and professional experience. We can draw on each other's ideas and perceptions for cross-fertilization, in the same way that notable pedagogues did a century ago. We can in fact share ideas on the same geographical as well as pedagogical terrain, because major seminars and conferences were held in Switzerland in the period between the two World Wars, and some pedagogues in whose footsteps we follow met

for several weeks at a time, including A.S. Neill from Britain who established the unconventional school Summerhill (that continues to resist regulation and to describe itself as the oldest children's democracy in the world). Both Rousseau and Pestalozzi were born in what is now Switzerland. When you pass through Geneva to or from Caux, you can consult the archives at the UNESCO office that house the correspondence between many pedagogues – exchanges between the social reform movement in pedagogy (which influenced the thinking behind children's rights), the more clinical pedagogical movement (influenced by evolutions in social sciences and medicine) and the spiritual movement. In the 1920s and 1930s, not only did such pedagogues receive a much wider hearing than had been the case earlier, but they engaged more with each other rather than working in parallel as before.

CATS shows children's participation as possible

Every year at CATS, we endeavour to show what children's participation looks like, and how children and adults can work as equal and competent partners. Even if this is for the limited period of a week, we hope that both children and adults will take something away with them as they journey back down the mountain to their daily contexts (diverse as these are since CATS draws participants from several continents around 50 countries are represented).

A CATS fully embodies a belief in children's rights, and is living homage to Janusz Korczak, the twentieth century pedagogue who was parent to the children's rights movement and who integrated pedagogical relationships with children's rights. A pediatrician as well as a children's author and an educator, Korczak set up two orphanages for street children in Warsaw at the beginning of the twentieth century. These orphanages were his CATS, a microcosm of what the world might look like if children were granted active citizenship. Korczak anticipated the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child including the three Ps embodied therein, namely: *Provision*, *Protection* and *Participation*, and he built the third P on the first two. How can you participate in learning if you are not provided for, if for example your stomach aches with hunger or in an unprotected environment where fear is the dominant emotion?

Although classified as orphanages, Korczak's institutions did not provide children off the street with charity. Instead he gave them dignity – through justice, respect, participation, dialogue and reflection – *justice* through the children's courts, *respect* by taking children seriously and listening well, *participation* through consultation and shared decision making, *dialogue* in

the sense of Socratic exchange as opposed to adult monologues and *reflection* through the encouragement of decent and democratic behavior (for example, the use of a letter box for angry exchanges between children, with a twenty four hour period of reflection as part of the mediation process).

The annual CATS event looks beyond Europe's borders, and Paulo Freire in Brazil took further Korczak's critical and transformative pedagogy in the second half of the twentieth century. Freire's ideas bolster CATS in encouraging children not only to claim their rights but to use those rights to transform society. Freire's books go beyond the pedagogy of the oppressed to the pedagogy of faith and of hope. The autonomy and agency that CATS lists among its aspirations for children resonate with Freire's emphasis on self determination and empowerment as the goals of learning, and not only the acquisition of skills.

George Orwell said, "each generation imagines itself to be more intelligent than the one that went before it, and wiser than the one that comes after it".

Really... Well maybe we need to change this.