

Jolanta Graczykowska

The Use of Original Play to solve the problem of discrimination in children's life

Children are the salvation of the world.

Janusz Korczak

Introduction

How could children save the world?

I am a teacher and a therapist by profession. For the last 12 years I have been exploring the nature of the process called "Original Play". During this time I have played with some 8,000 children and teenagers throughout the world. These include healthy children as well as kids with developmental problems or behavioural disorders such as: aggression, hyperactivity disorder, autism, cerebral palsy and Down's syndrome. I have also played with children who are visually impaired, hard of hearing and victims of cruelty inflicted on them by adults, including their own parents. I have worked and played in educational institutions including: schools, kindergartens, rehabilitation centres, special needs schools, day-care therapeutic centres, orphanages, pre-adoptive institutions, paediatric wards in hospitals and refugee camps in Africa.

As a practitioner I look at the problem of discrimination from the perspective of my considerable experience with the Original Play programme. I will show how this programme helps solve the issue of discrimination. I will also relate Original Play to the ideas and practice proposed by J. Korczak and will point out the similarities between J.Korczak's approach and Original Play's.

The UNESCO Convention Against Discrimination in Education defines the term 'discrimination' as "*any distinction, exclusion, limitation or preference which, being based on race, colour, sex, language, religion, political or other opinion, national or social origin, economic condition or birth, has the purpose or effect of nullifying or impairing equality of treatment in education*".

When I play with children who come from various cultures, ethnic and social backgrounds, children who have one, both or no parents, kids who must live in a children's home, I notice what they have in common. Their main problem is the lack of love. They do not experience love, they do not share love, nor do they know how to give it to others.

I suggest that the problem of not feeling loved and not being able to love, in other words, not experiencing love or living out of love, is a factor which excludes children from and seriously impairs their participation in social life. It is something that deprives children of opportunities to fully develop their potential and even robs them of any sense of the meaning of life. Let me now refer to just two of my recent experiences as a play specialist.

1. Since October, 2013 I have regularly visited a Children's Home in Warsaw and played there with two to five-year-olds. A few weeks ago a four-year-old boy had his birthday party. When the time came to make a wish and blow out the candles his teacher asked him what his greatest wish was. The boy became sad and replied, "I wish my mummy loved me". I played with the boy the following day. I was holding him in my arms and mentioned his birthday and wished him all the best. However, the boy did not show any signs of joy at the mention of his birthday. On the contrary, I felt how overwhelmed with sadness he was.

2. A few weeks ago Fred Donaldson, author of Original Play program and I were invited to run an Original Play workshop in Switzerland. We met two adults, who volunteered to help in one of the Children's Homes in Armenia and have worked there for a couple of years. One of them mentioned that during one of her first visits she asked the children, aged nine to eighteen, what dreams and wishes they had. It turned out that they did not have any. They were not able to discover within themselves what they wished for.

I was deeply moved by these two experiences which raise a number of questions. Why is it that the Armenian children did not have any dreams? What happened to their sense of self? Why could a four-year old boy from Warsaw articulate his wish to be loved whereas the nine to eighteen-year-olds from Armenia could not? Did the Armenian children ever have a chance to feel loved? Have the adults in their communities deprived them of the hope that life can be different? Why do so many children across the world live in emotional poverty thinking that their lives are meaningless? If we, adults, accept such a state as a fact of life we infringe upon the children's right for equality of treatment.

J. Korczak demanded that a child be treated as a complete human being from the moment he or she is born. He strongly advocated that children should be raised so that they would never even think "I am a nobody. Only an adult can be somebody." Or "I am a little older but still a nobody. How long am I to wait?" J. Korczak said, "Love should be fundamental in a relationship between a teacher/caregiver and a child."

John Paul II once said, ,, When a human does not experience love, does not touch it and make it his, if he does not find life participation in it, he will become incomprehensible to himself and his life will be pointless. V. E. Frankl has said something similar. No one will ever become fully aware of what his/her fellow human being is like unless they love them. Only this feeling enables us to notice the fundamental features of the person we love. Only then can we become aware of his or her full potential, which might not yet have been, but should be realized.

I have a feeling that love remains an abstract notion which usually comes down to empty words and phrases and parents' beliefs that they love their own children. Both parents and

teachers have problems not only expressing their love for children, and showing it, but also recognizing the signs that they receive love from children. Very often children do not experience love in their homes. From teachers I keep hearing comments like *“The family is supposed to give love to a child.”* But what if there is no love in the family? Too many children experience a lack of love and consequently they lose contact with their own needs and with those of other people.

My countless visits in all sorts of educational institutions around the world have made it absolutely clear to me that there are more and more children who display symptoms of serious deficits in the areas of sympathy and empathy. Aggression and physical and emotional violence are widespread among children and teenagers. Neurobiologists claim that, *Children, who have experienced little empathy and understanding them, and affection, have not received an image which they can mirror. [...] they do not have their own neurobiological programs enabling them to experience and show compassion (J.Bauer)*

Research shows (D.Goleman) that deficits in the sphere of empathy or mirroring can be treated. Being able to feel empathy takes time. It is my firm belief that all educational institutions should be places where facilitating children’s emotional development and enabling them to form bonds with other people should be one of the top priorities.

One of J. Korczak’s concerns was how to lead a child into a life so that he or she is convinced that everything is right, just, reasonably motivated and constant. He said, *“We often come across adult people who become outraged by an issue instead of ignoring it, who treat others with contempt in situations where sympathy would be more appropriate. As far as negative feelings go, we are all self-taught experts. When they teach us the ABC’s of life they only teach us a few characters and hide the remaining ones from us. It is a small wonder that we make mistakes while reading.”* J. Korczak’s evaluation of the process of raising a child is quite critical. He issues a warning wake-up call to us, urging us to reflect and think in a creative way. How are we to get to know a child better? It is as if half of humanity does not even exist; their lives are a joke, their dreams are naïve, their feelings are fleeting, their views are amusing or ridiculous. What have we done to find out about children ? What have we done to create favourable conditions for them to grow and mature? – J. Korczak asked. J. Korczak’s concerns are still valid. We still keep asking ourselves such questions. How to raise a child without aggression? How to raise a child with a feeling of completeness? How are we to love a child?

In order to solve the problem of discrimination it is not enough to issue a series of reports, analyses or write theoretical dissertations. We need to create conditions in education which will show and teach the children through their own experiences how to exist beyond racial, class, gender, economic or ethnic divisions. We need broadly conceived practical programmes, actions and activities which will show children a clear message of values and priorities in life. As parents, teachers, therapists, caregivers or education managers, we should act in a clear, consistent and coherent manner in our relationships with children.

The issue of discrimination is an element of an eternal problem of humans who function within patterns of fighting, self-defence, rivalry, categorization, comparison and division into

the privileged and the underprivileged. Such patterns of behaviour and interpersonal relations need to be transformed into ones which are based on the feelings of security, love and a sense of belonging. We cannot teach our children how to give love and accept others if we ourselves are stuck in the patterns of behaviour based on differences and divisions.

While raising children we should first and foremost spend time with them and be with them so that we become sensitive to their needs and are able to listen to what they say. We need to set a good example by our own attitudes and deeds. J. Korczak described the essence of his communication with children by saying: ... *I did not talk to children , I talked with children..... I did not tell them what I wanted them to be like, but who they wanted to be and who they could become.*

We need a fresh look at who a child is. We need to reach out to a child as an autonomous person and we need to be one as well. In other words, we must find a human being in every person and in ourselves. The process of bringing up a child should concentrate not as much on the formation or moulding of another person as on showing them, guiding them and revealing the dignity of a human being.

Twelve years ago when I received a leaflet advertising an Original Play workshop I thought: "I don't like to play. Once again I'll have to show certain skills and compete with other people". This is our most common image of play that we have. Cultural play and games require participation according to certain rules set up by adults. They often involve competition that results in feelings of either success or defeat. Such cultural play is based on certain skills and so only some people can play, while others are excluded because of their limitations or insufficient skills. Children face the problem of discrimination and exclusion even in their early childhood. From the beginning we teach them that they have to be strong, they have to fight and achieve success. Beginning in their early years we compare them with others in terms of their intellectual and physical skills; we judge and evaluate them, and exert pressure on them by telling them that they have to be the best at everything. As early as kindergarten we let children sit in front of computers instead of teaching them relations with other human beings in real life. We limit their innate capacity to perceive the world as a whole.

Do adults see anything special when they watch children play? At first sight they only see playing children. Child's play most of the time does not cause adults to reflect on its meaning. As we grow up, we lose interest in, we abandon or even become afraid of this early world. Looking at child's play from an adult point of view, we perceive it as something chaotic, unproductive or, at best, an absorbing way of releasing children's energy.

Children are the ones who can describe Original Play most accurately. Five-year-old David once said, " play is when we don't know that we are different from each other". Another six-year-old boy told me after playing: " true play is when no one has a broken heart.'

What Original Play proposes is a completely different kind of human relationship. It strengthens in children the feeling of being loved. It creates a bond and a sense of unity. It does not allow anyone to feel excluded, diminished or abandoned. Original play is what

M. Buber described as true reciprocity in a relationship of “you and me” in which we experience beneficial mutual trust.

The central element of the Original Play process is the human being perceived as a person. It means that all participants in play remain in a human-to-human relationship. Everyone takes part in this process.

The crucial feature of Original Play is that adults create proper conditions for children in which to play. It is the child who decides whether or not to participate and express himself or herself in the play. During play children have the right and possibility to be at peace with their own personality and experience. During play they express themselves with their whole selves and this is what they expect from adults. They expect our sincerity, authenticity and commitment. The adults have to give up the conviction that they are more competent, more clever, and more worthy than the children. We have to abandon all pre-conceptions and free ourselves from constant judging and labeling children.

Original Play is most of all about experiencing. It combines physical, emotional, cognitive and social aspects of the person.

During the play an adult remains sensitive to the child's feelings and emotions and shows the attitude of unconditional love while at the same time is the recipient of feelings and emotions expressed by children. Children who feel unconditionally accepted while playing can also feel loved simply for the very fact that they exist. From my experience, this message is strong enough to stimulate initial positive changes in the behavior of aggressive children. Such children seem to rediscover themselves during the play, as if the once forgotten sensitivity and empathy were returning to them. I have played with many such children for a few months or even a few years. I have watched how empathy, sensitivity, and the sense of responsibility for others develop in them.

According to the concept of synchronizing, which is the idea of communicating via signals sent and read by the body, the body is the primary medium of communication. During play without any words we can show children our affection and sense of belonging. While playing with children we use two languages of love: we touch them, which is a natural outcome of the play, and we devote our time and attention to them. However, many parents and teachers touch children only when it is necessary to clean, give them a bath or intervene, or try to solve a problem. Many parents do not find the time to hug their children and many teachers are simply afraid of touching children.

What needs to be realized is that touch is the strongest and the most natural way of showing love to children. Children experience the play with their whole selves. I could say that during play our worlds merge. All differences fade away. We become one spiritual entity. J. Korczak experienced his contact with children in a similar way. He would poetically say: "When I play or talk with a child, two moments from my and his/her life intertwine".

The world of adults is primarily verbal. Children perceive themselves as a complete person and this is how they want to be treated. The role of play is to integrate the physical and the

intellectual. I think it is necessary to build bridges between the two worlds that often stand in conflict: the intellectual world of adults and spontaneous, innocent and physical world of childhood and youth.



History and practice of Original Play

The Original Play programme was first presented in the Center of Educational Development in Warsaw in 2007. Since then it has been demonstrated at various educational events and conferences.

A few major projects have been designed and carried out using Original Play. One such project – Education for peace – International School exchange received the honorary patronage of Polish UNESCO Committee. During that programme children and teenagers from Poland, Austria, Germany, Italy and the USA played together and experienced the sense of belonging that allows them to rise above cultural, national or linguistic differences. To the best of my knowledge, it is the first project of this kind in Europe and it shows that using Original Play enables us to eliminate all barriers and create the basic and necessary conditions to promote world peace. I described the project in my paper called “The basis of education. Continuity and change.”

The original play programme I am referring to is developing in Europe in Austria, Germany, Switzerland, Sweden, Greece, Italy as well as outside Europe in the Republic of South Africa, Bahrain, Singapore and the USA. Poland is the only place in Europe where practical seminars for people from all over the world are organized. Specialists from various parts of the world come to Warsaw to take part in the seminars I organize to see how I play with children and improve, develop and perfect their skills regarding the use of Original Play.

The Original Play programme has received numerous recommendations from various educational institutions. It is valued for its preventive and correctional role in coping with the problem of aggression, conflict, social exclusion as well as for creating proper conditions for children to learn and develop their social skills.

One of my dreams has come true. For years I have been dreaming how wonderful it would be if through Original Play two worlds could be brought together - the world of normally developing children and the world of children with developmental problems. One of

Warsaw's secondary schools and a high school opened themselves to the idea of Original Play. A small group of students from both schools took a beginner course in Original Play. Together with me the students visited several educational institutions in Warsaw such as kindergartens and a special needs school.

They play with children in a Children's Home for small children. It is remarkable to see how differences disappear when they develop mutual understanding, exchange emotions, feel sympathy. I would like people from all over the world to realize the value of such actions, to see that 'peaceful coexistence' is not only a catchy phrase. It can be manifested in real life.

There are many people in many countries who support children through play in their local communities. Some of them also visit children's homes and orphanages in other countries as a labour of love. They act from the bottom of their hearts. I wish the world realized the value of such actions. Especially with the support of decision makers such initiatives could become much more common and would benefit the children of the world.



Conclusion

If we are to prevent and solve the issue of discrimination getting to know each other and experiencing each other is crucial. According to C.Taylor, the contemporary human being craves both dignity (equal rights) and recognition (not only of the person, but also his or her ethnic nationality and tradition). A single individual despite their inner and outer skills cannot be self-sufficient and needs others to help them build their identity. (C.Taylor)

Education in Europe needs to help people open to each other and stimulate the expression of their values, feelings and needs. This will allow humans to adapt to new conditions more quickly and effectively while preserving the sense of identity and boosting each other's self-esteem (J.Niktorowicz). Educational activities should promote the paradigm of peaceful coexistence, which presupposes the possibility of development as a result of agreement and cooperation which are the foundations of tolerance.

When I play with children I get very close to their feelings, emotions, the way they experience the world, and to what they crave. I can hear what they want to say to the world, what their greatest wish is. Children's greatest dream is to be loved, to experience how others respond to their feelings, to feel a sense of belonging with others. The desire to play, to participate, to be a part of this experience is very strong. Playing together without any element of competition, aggression, without the feeling of being inferior helps us synchronize our feelings with the

feelings of others, it triggers positive emotions, and it reduces misunderstandings. Such prevention, which is not about defense and fighting, but about offering, sharing, exchanging, learning from each other the ability to resolve conflicts at the same time minimizing the differences between us. It helps us rise above all divisions and differences, giving us a sense of belonging and allowing us to bond with others. Original play is a captivating experience on both individual and group levels.

I realize that there are many obstacles and barriers that make it difficult to move on from declarations about our love for children and about unity to practice. Parents struggle with everyday hardships, it is difficult for them to find the time for genuine contact with their child. Teachers complain and say "we don't have time for this". School syllabi are overloaded, the classes are too large. There is stress or even fear of giving children too much freedom regarding their behavior. There is no agreement about how to allow children to express their emotions.

If we are to avoid the problem of discrimination, we have to find the time for genuine contact with a child, for a dialogue through play, for a bonding process. There is a pressing need to develop our sensitivity to the value of another human being. There is a need for a new view of play as an experience which is beneficial for our development. There is a need to create conditions and situations which can enable mutual "growing up in love and for love", which can enable us to sense and find out what the other person experiences, to check on how the signals we send to other human beings are received. There is a need for new competences and skills among all people who accompany children in their development.

We also have to ask ourselves a question as to whether we are able to assume a child's point of view, to see the world from the perspective of someone who is just one meter tall, to see ourselves through a child's eyes, to listen to each other.

During their original play children experience "the joy of what is possible", which M. Buber wrote about. Then the whole world becomes a playground. It is when scientists, sages and children play in the world they feel they belong. No competition. No boundaries. Just like Meister Eckhart showed in the following conversation: *"When does a man begin to understand? The reply: "When he or she sees things separately." "And when do they begin to comprehend? ", To this I can reply „when they see that everything is one. Then they know all."*

T. Merton said *„We do not need to strive to become one. We already are. It is just enough to abandon the illusion that we are not.'* Child's play helps us to free ourselves from this illusion and helps us to understand. In this sense children are for me, as J. Korczak put it, "the salvation for the world".

