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Visible, more than Ever: Unequal Childhoods in Istanbul during COVID-19

In our kingdom of trouble

The ideas of Janusz Korczak belong to our time so much that his balancing point of view between pleasure and trouble reminds me of *mindfulness*, which is quite popular in recent years all over the world. According to him, “kingdom of pleasure, balls, salons, and beautiful clothes” and “other kingdom of hunger, troubles, and hard work” (as cited in Lifton 1988, p. 50) exist together at the same time. Due to the effect of COVID-19, social inequalities in society became more visible than ever: from the refugee crisis in the border between Greece and Turkey at the beginning of March to social movements against racism in various states of US after George Floyd’s death at the end of May. Although the direct relation of those unequal situations to coronavirus is not so clear at first glance, it is apparent that the call of “stay-at-home” could not be inclusive of black workers or refugees, that call was only valid for the privileged people from upper and middle-classes, who had an economic chance to work from home or the option not to work for a while. Meanwhile, children have also been affected by those times differently, according to their nationality, ethnicity, class, gender and all other variables, separating their everyday lives from each other. In this part about our “trouble-kingdom,” I will share my latest observations from Istanbul, Turkey and then, I will tell how pre-schoolers and school kids have experienced “lockdown” process; at

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the last part, I will suggest some strategies to turn our separation to solidarity by referring to Janusz Korczak.

In her well-known study, Lareau (2003) addresses the settled differences among children's daily lives, deriving from their families' race and class. While lower-class and/or black families couldn't have attention to their kids' education or success, white middle-class parents spend time with their children and motivate them to develop themselves in cultural and social trajectories. Besides that, parents from higher socioeconomic status have also more cultural capital so they can talk more to each other in their family life, while there is less speech in worker-class families (2003, p. 238). Eichsteller reminds us that children in general didn't use to have emotional value in the past, while children for Polish upper class have had for a long while. Furthermore, he underlines "Korczak's passion to see as priceless every child, including particularly the poorest street children who lived in his orphanage" (Eichsteller 2011, p. 500). We know the history is the history of war and crime, rather than love and pleasure, besides, we are all aware of the existing inequalities around ourselves, as academics and intellectual people who have so many privileges compared to other occupations. For instance, majority of workers had anxiety because of the risk of losing their jobs during the pandemic, whilst academic staff despite their low part time income felt they can continue their employment moving some activities online.

According to the report of Disk Research Center (2020) in May "The number of unemployed who have lost hope for finding a job has increased by 486 thousand people in comparison with the previous year, reaching 1 million 107 thousand," which is an indicator that unemployment in 'broader' meaning seems to increase aftermath the deepening of the post pandemic crisis. As the ongoing economic crisis in Turkey since 2018, the government already developed a strategy not to prevent the existing workforce by requesting citizens to take their 'own precaution', that's why the lockdown in Turkey was just limited to middle-class people staying at home. Moreover, there was a controversial age-specific restriction that "during the week, the stay-at-home order only applies to those under the age of 20 or over 65" (Damon & Tuysuz 2020). Therefore, construction areas and factories have been able to stay open during 'our' lockdown, while people who were thought to be 'too old to work' had to stay home. That situation was quite remarkable to discuss ageism in a so-called 'solidaristic' Eastern society.

At that point though, I would like to draw attention to people under 20, most of them as students who are not included in the workforce yet (unless the risk of child labour is considered as an issue here). The majority of those were also children reliant on decision of adults. All those children and young people also were prohibited to go outside, so that they might have a chance to study their lessons online if they were able to.

Online education vs. distance education

UNESCO has made public the ratio of children who have been impacted by “closures” as “over 60% of the world’s student population” (2020) and there are almost 25 million students, that constitutes more than 30% of the whole population in Turkey. The Ministry of National Education has already been working on a digital platform called EBA¹, where teachers give classes remotely through the internet or TV channels, so, right after the first coronavirus case officially occurred in Turkey, the Ministry of National Education (2020) announced that EBA system would be used for distance education and “a pilot study of live classroom application allowing interactive lectures by eliminating the distance between the teacher and students during distance education process for 8th and 12th grade students” was planned. Because the education system in Turkey is more centralised than many OECD countries (OECD 2017), from pre-schoolers to high-schoolers, all students were to study via EBA. Whereas, there was no attempt for interactive education for pre-schooler or pupils, who actually need social and emotional intimacy more. It was apparent that the pilot study’s preparation for 8th and 12th-graders was because of the national exams, LGS² for 8th-graders and YKS³ for 12th-graders. With only this information, it can be deduced that Turkish education system is still exam-based, no matter is in-class or remote.

Apart from all these, the distinction between public and private schools at pre-primary and primary levels in Turkey has been significant. There are still quite prestigious public universities and colleges at tertiary and secondary

¹ EBA: Eğitim Bilişim Ağı, which means “Education Informatic Network” in Turkish.

² LGS is the high-school/college (secondary education) admission test in Turkey.

³ YKS is the university admission test in Turkey, which is a national and central exam.

levels, which have higher academic success, however, younger kids in public schools might not have access to an eligible milieu especially for social and cultural ways. So, what has happened these days? These days, pupils in private schools have continued their “online” education with their teacher and classmates, while their peers in public schools have already lost their interest in “remote” classes on television. ‘Television’ seems important to address, because having a computer at home is another issue to debate. According to TurkStat’s⁴ ICT usage survey (2019) “82.5% of households had broadband Internet connection” whereas, only “49.1% of households used fixed broadband connection (ADSL, cable, optic fibre, etc.)”, which is faster and more useful for studying or working. During the lockdown process, when lots of people started to work at home-office and we continued our classes online, the internet speed became a massive problem for the whole country: it is quite understandable that even at night time, wi-fi connection at home was never sufficient to upload or download something, even to text a message via social media sometimes. The infrastructure of the internet is so weak that we had to ‘sacrifice’ our time and/or work for our housemates. For example, when I had a lecture, my sister had to go offline; when she had a meeting online, I had to close my laptop and I-pad’s wi-fi connection.

So, it was challenging for people to study and work simultaneously unless they live alone. The statistics below belong to the data gained from people who are between 16 and 75, which means we haven’t had sufficient information about children’s access to technological devices and internet connection yet. There are some other studies focusing on children’s ICT usage, but these are not updated frequently enough. It is stated that “24.4% of children aged 6–15 have their private computers, while 13.3% have mobile phones and 2.9% have game consoles” in the report of ‘use of ICT and media by children aged 6–15’ (TurkStat, 2013). Even those ratios might be increased in the last seven years, especially younger kids may not have their own mobile phones or personal computers because of screen-time limitations. Despite that, all children immediately needed digital devices to become included online not only to have lessons but also to communicate with their peers to socialize. That has been the main conflict in times of COVID-19 in general, everybody regardless of age

⁴ TurkStat: Turkish Statistical Institute

must be online for a reason. At this point, in order to underline what kind of inequalities have occurred during this time, it is necessary to separate online education ‘meetings’ from ‘remote education.’

Regardless of their definitions: ‘remote’ or ‘distance,’ many teachers don’t want to use these terms as far as I have observed from the teachers I personally know and through social media. They prefer to use the word “online education.” It is similar to the reaction about the meaning of “social distance,” people subverted it into “physical distance and social connection”. In distance education, teachers prepare their lessons to share asynchronously, the distance is re-produced through time, in addition to space; while teachers and students have a chance to come together simultaneously to make a conversation and share something in common through time in ‘online education.’ That is the main difference: the potential to make a classroom via interactive communication. Unless there is interaction, that would become social isolation. It can be claimed that children from low income families had that kind of experience more than the others. Additionally, more parents/caregivers from lower-classes had to work outside compared to the others so that they were at higher risk of infection; besides, children might feel more isolated at home because of the prohibition to go outside in their parents’ absence.

Considering all of these, the new ‘troubles’ may be listed as:

- Education: children who have no access to school; children who can only get ‘lessons’ alone; children who have a connection to the teacher, peers, friends via the online classroom
- Health: children at risk of coronavirus because of other people from the household; children who can protect themselves from outside the house
- Family life: children who hardly see their parents due to their jobs; children who can spend more time with their families during the lockdown
- Lockdown: because of the prohibition for all under 20, all children are seen ‘equal’ in an unequal position. On the other hand, they don’t share the same apartment: while some of them can easily reach their garden, balcony, or yard, some children are restricted in confined spaces.

The distinctions can never be as clear as I listed. There are probably more problems or other benefits that I could not foresee. In any case, I’m trying to

keep Korczak's words in my mind: "love the child, not only your own" (cited in Eichsteller 2011, p. 500) and I can realize the lockdown experiences caused all distances to become equal. Through this perspective, I am trying to stay as close to children from all over the world, as long as the internet speed lets us meet. And finally, my question is: what would Korczak do? Is there any possibility to transform the unclearness of our physical existence via online spaces into a new kind of equality? If so, how?

Korczak's contribution to today's children

Janusz Korczak's name connotes children's rights primarily, but his main point is in my view, human rights and justice in general. Since "Children are not future human beings, they are already human beings" (Gliński 2019) is the basic opinion of him about children's being themselves, Korczak's inspiration to childhood studies, children's rights, and related field is exactly up to date. The humanitarian crisis we have been facing politically and economically, has deepened due to COVID-19, humanity needs to discover solutions for the future. In reference to Lewinski (1992, p. 244), Korczak's advice to children was basically that "one must never give up one's humanity, even in the face of death." At the hardest time of the world, not only in the face of death but also in the face of inhumanity, it is apparent that Korczak could always see positive sides of human beings and could keep his hopefulness against the crisis of the dark days. That is why it is quite understandable why Lifton (1988, p. 6) prefers talking about living Korczak who is "vital and fallible." In the biography of Janusz Korczak, there are some memories about what a funny and extraordinary grown-up he was, he even let the children "draw on his bald head with the coloured pencils he was using on the blueprints" (Lifton 1988, p. 32). He valued the nature of children's play as the foundation of the human personality so that he respected children's plays and speech and tried to make their voices to be heard.

According to Janusz Korczak, the only difference between children and grown-ups is children's lack of experience. However, despite this mere difference children are underestimated and seen as incompetent in the face of adults because of it. He underlines the necessity to respect their lack of expe-

rience. Vucic (2018, p. 4) defines children having less experience as “newly arrived foreigners”. They have a fresh mind to learn and to become aware of the circumstances around. At this point, ‘our’ responsibilities for children seem important to debate: to start with a question by Korczak himself, “How can they know how to face tomorrow if we do not allow them to live an aware, responsible life today?” (2017, p. 33). It is clear that Korczak asks people to make a room for children to see, learn, experience and have a say: they have the right to be who they are. To allow them to live aware and responsible, first of all, we need to share all the conflicts and problems of today with them clearly. A child can understand everything like a grown-up if we know how to pass this information. So, all the process about the lockdown, the effects of viruses and even the history of epidemic and pandemic illnesses could be told to children. Question marks and unclearness affect people worse and this is why children have a right to be aware.

Nowadays, lockdown or stay-at-home warnings are becoming weak, we are going back to an almost ‘normal’ life. However, most of the colleges and universities, even several private schools in Istanbul at pre-primary, primary and secondary levels begun to prepare their schedules accordingly to provide remote education for next (autumn) semester due to the risk of second wave and protection against the pandemic. As a result, it is quite important to cope with settled unequal situations already now. The steps can be classified by different scales:

- At the *macro-level*; government and international institutions should provide digital devices for all children. United Nations (2020) declares that it is “more than ever essential that the global community comes together now to foster universal access to information and knowledge through open educational resources” and published a call for free access to educational materials. Meanwhile, UNICEF (2020) has commenced a donation campaign for children’s access to education and health systems as well.
- UNICEF Turkey National Committee (2020) is also included in the call for a donation that people can provide children “home learning pack” at *mezzo-level*. Except having devices, to advocate democratic online education equally, there should be some public programs and lessons for children of different age and degree of ICT

literacy skills. Children need to gain help to become literate also in digital literacy.

- Just as becoming literate means to express oneself in public, digital literacy may be used like that: through digital platforms, children are able to come together to build up their solidarity networks. It can be started as a *micro-level* in accordance with a little movement of a specific group of people as children. On the other hand, it has the potential to become a huge children movement.

Little Review as “the most democratic paper in the world” (Einsteller 2011, p. 177) was one of the earliest examples of children’s movement and agency. In 1926, almost a century ago, children gained a space to speak to people, both adults and children, through a public magazine. In the contemporary world, digital competency becomes an obligation instead of an option, therefore, the digital gap is one of the most significant obstacles to resolve. If a child has “the right to live for today” (Einsteller 2011, p. 507), it means that they have to gain digital access to be a witness of today’s world, where the digital world exists as a large part within it. Recalling the essential point of view of Korczak, we as grown-ups should teach children how to love the other children whoever they are and wherever they live in the world. We need to motivate them to teach each other in order to overcome both physical and digital gaps between themselves and the struggle with unequal childhoods. This suggestion for children to unite by means of the digital world may become similar to the *Children’s Court* and *Children’s Council* over time, as it is built on self-governing principles.

In the well-known children’s novel by Janusz Korczak, *King Matt the First*, “Matt wanted all the people to govern, but children were part of the people, too” (2005, p. 239) at that point, children’s citizenship is basically discussed as an issue. In recent years, the new debates on children’s agency transformed into ‘childism’ to provide justice for both children and grown-ups, just like feminism. In 1922, the novel reflects the idea of childism: “The little children know what little children need, and the big children know what big children need. I hope that someday children from all over the world will meet [...]” (Korczak 2005: 347). Even though Matt is a fictional character, children with green flags as a symbol of childhood-movement and the Children’s Parliament is real, at least, within ‘Our Home.’ So, children’s political

organization has been experienced before, even in the hard times. As Vucic (2019) explained to us in the ‘self-governing workshop’ she had organized (as a part of 12th UNESCO Janusz Korczak Chair International Summer School), “Every incoming child knew the opinion of others about themselves by the referendum held after a trial period of three months. The aggregated results of the vote (+/0/-) with the proportion of likes, dislikes and neutrality,” Korczak created an example of ‘self-regulating society’ on the micro-level. Referring to Vucic’s headline, that community also provided every person there to develop ‘self-governmentality’ to face the others and adapt to the order of society: the point seems that ‘the order of society’ is flexible in accordance with every single child’s behaviour, opinion, or attitude to each other. In that case, the voting system about what kind of person one is, might be reconsidered as a new system to reveal one’s advantages and disadvantages compared to others all over the world. On the one hand, it sounds like a hierarchical order among children, on the other hand, this suggestion may be seen as an attempt to build an inter-sectional perspective for childhood studies, that will be realized by children themselves. Instead of the proportion of likes/neutrality/dislikes, the new system can become “privileged/non-privileged/aggrieved,” such as;

+/0/-

- Location: live in a developed/developing/undeveloped country
- Class: live with upper/middle/lower-class caregivers
- Race/ethnicity: raised in a white/black or immigrant/black and immigrant family
- Gender: cis-male/cis-female/other identities under LGBT+ umbrella
- Disability: without disability/physically or mentally/physically and mentally disabled
- Daily life: access to quality education/access to education/otherwise; child workers, children in jail, poverty or other factors as obstacles to access education for children.

The examples may become even more varied. The main purpose is here to develop self-awareness for each child. In this imaginary system, each of them would vote and self evaluate then in accordance with an average result, every child could realize how advantageous their position is compared to others; which means they, as the “privileged” ones need to conduct solidarity networks. Incidentally, I should underline it is only a suggestion for children’s

organizations inspired by Korczak's experience. As a grown-up, my only role in children's networks might be mentoring and leading them to question power relations between us, even the 'empowerment' concept itself. When we consider children's agency and participation, we usually use that concept which reproduces inequality: empowerment sounds like giving power to them; as long as one has the power to give, that means s/he also has the power over them as another group of people, not only children.

Unfortunately, unequal childhoods are reproduced even among children themselves: when I attended the "Children's Participation Right Symposium" in Istanbul in 2019, I had a chance to listen to different children's experiences about child participation. I realized that generally middle-class children, who went to prestigious colleges, were playing active roles in the formal council on children's rights. I hope I might be wrong about my very limited observation, but, the language of some of the children there, reflected the existing hierarchical relation they had. That means, we need to start from questioning the settled power relations in our everyday lives. The nature of power relations is complex and cannot be understood easily, on the other hand, children and young people have 'power' to reconstruct power relations owing to their lack of seriousness. The childish essence inside us has also the potential to teach us how to build a better world, as Korczak provided from his childish side during his life.

Moreover, instead of child-friendly perspectives, it is necessary to create spaces for children to lead the whole process by themselves. Even in the educational system, outcomes and benefits should not be reported by us, the adults, the teachers. It is sure that there are some criteria, such as academic success, children's development and learning stages, however, their development of self-awareness, self-governing are as important as academic indicators. Thus, we should let children report their 'learning outcomes' as a beginning to reform education. In the meantime, as an advantage of COVID-19 times; not only I am investigating and considering all of these but also parents, caregivers and other subjects have already become aware of what children face during their classes. Public schools and government policies have also become more visible than ever during home-education. In conclusion, I try to reveal the positive sides for children, just like Korczak would do in order to be helpful in their journey of life. I think Janusz Korczak would benefit the

online world for children to unite, to make them learn experiences of others and from each other, and let them access relative and infinitive knowledge. As a result, there might be a possibility to build equality together if only we open the doors of opportunity.

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