

Montessori and Freedom Grow Side by Side in the Ukraine

By Karen Spring, Development Director at Princeton Montessori School

This is a story of extraordinary vision with a happy ending. And of courageous participants, who bridged thousands of miles and even greater cultural distances to bring the hope of the Montessori philosophy to a people troubled by the past and only recently daring to dream of a democratic future.

It begins in 1992. Even as the Berlin wall and the Soviet empire were crumbling into dust, the walls of Ukraine's First Montessori School were miraculously rising deep behind the strife-torn Iron Curtain.

The end of the cold war not only transformed Ukraine; it marked the emergence of a new way of looking at the world, called globalization. Information, capital, goods, and labor move around the world now and so – thought a few wise educators – can the Montessori approach to education.

Boris Zhebrovsky, Head of the Main Board of Public Education in Kyiv, Ukraine, had attended an educational conference in Austria that showcased various educational methods. Mr. Zhebrovsky, inspired by the Montessori philosophy, saw a link between educating independent thinkers with the needs a new global democracy. The Montessori approach to education became his window into the future, seeing Ukrainian children realizing visions and dreams made possible with freedom and globalization.

The late Dr. Nancy McCormick Rambusch, who brought Montessori education to the United States, consulted with Mr. Zhebrovsky about implementing Montessori education within the Ukrainian culture. *“Her tremendous contribution to Montessori education reflects what Dr. Rambusch stood for; a hope that we would see our work as an evolution, not an attempt to mimic perfection – but a reflection, and most importantly, a promise of the best education we can yield to children.”* Dr. John J. McDermott

Tatyana Mikhaltchuk, Principal of the First Montessori School, and Vera Goryunova, Deputy Director of the Education Board of Kyiv, appreciated the intrinsic nature of the Montessori philosophy and embraced the idea of Montessori education working within the Ukrainian culture, customs and traditions. Ms. Mikhaltchuk, and Ms. Goryunova worked with Montessorians in the Netherlands and America and successfully created a Ukrainian Montessori School, sensitive to its heritage, but loyal to the main tenants of Montessori education.

“Their classrooms look similar to those at Princeton Montessori School, and their children like ours, thrive in the purposeful, self-directed, and respectful community environment,” says Marsha Stencel, Head of Princeton Montessori School.

Montessori education is flourishing throughout Ukraine. The Ukrainian Montessori Society, started in 1995, and provides Montessori teacher training throughout the country. Today, over thirty Montessori schools spread throughout 13 regions of Ukraine. The first private Montessori School will soon be opening in Kyiv and, like a business, needs to differentiate and attract new families; a sure sign of a democratic society.

“Globalization expands citizens’ freedom of choice. It gives citizens more information about new ideas, expanding their range of possibilities,” Ms. Stencel added.

Last November the world got a glimpse into the new Ukraine, when young Ukraine citizens took to the streets, wearing orange clothing in support of Viktor Yushchenko for President, and demanded a new vote from a fraudulent election. These freedom fighters are the children of the cold war. And, now this generation can choose the education that best meets the needs of their family.

The Princeton Montessori School and the Princeton Center Teacher Education continue to collaborate with the educational leadership of Kyiv and train Ukrainian teachers and instructors. There continues to be no exchange of money between our two lands, only ideas. The goal is to expand Montessori in a free society and fulfill Dr. Rambusch’ vision.

Ginny Cusack, Director of Princeton Center Teacher Education, who has been a consultant from the start on the Ukrainian Montessori project, made the comment, *“At first the project was one in which we Princeton educators were giving, and the Ukrainian educators were receiving. As time went on, we found that Princeton educators were also receiving tremendous personal and professional benefits from our Ukrainian connection. Similarly, we see that our work is giving the promised educational benefits to Ukrainian children, and also giving surprising benefits to the children at Princeton Montessori School.”*

“The teachers have a role that is bigger than the classroom – they are influencing children on the other side of the world,” added, Joyce Tatsch, Princeton Montessori School Early Childhood Teacher and PCTE Instructor, who has also played an instrumental role in the progress that has been made in the Ukraine.

Montessori and freedom grow side by side in the Ukraine. Perhaps the big question for Montessorians is, should we proactively bring Montessori to other free eastern European countries? This challenge stands before Montessorians around the free world. We are a global society and have earned the responsibility and opportunity to move freedom forward.