

# on the road towards child-centered education: Step by Step in Moldova

by Cornelia Cincilei

As a result of the decrease in the number of preschool-aged children in a small town in Moldova and the merger of two kindergartens, the classrooms that survived had to be reorganized. It happened that Ionel, a four year old who had previously attended a Step by Step classroom, was transferred into a non-Step by Step classroom. Within a couple of weeks, the kindergarten principal was very surprised when Ionel's mother walked into her office and sincerely concerned, and slightly reproachful, asked,

"What wrong have we done? Why were we punished by this transfer to the non-Step by Step classroom? Our child does not ask questions any more . . ."

This anecdotal story is very symptomatic of the crucial role the teacher has in molding the personality of the young learner and his attitude towards learning, either by fanning the child's curiosity and further promoting his inquisitiveness as basis for active learning, or rather by stifling this innate curiosity and the child's natural drive for learning.

The latter is most likely to happen in a so-called teacher-centered educational paradigm, in its extreme manifestation, when the teacher's main concern is to

deliver the curriculum content and to treat the children as objects of his or her own act of teaching. On the contrary, in a child-centered paradigm that is grounded in the perception of children as constructors of their own knowledge, the teacher cannot ignore children's knowledge base (with possible stereotypes and misconceptions), as well as individual interests and needs that children bring into their educational experiences.

The child-centered program contributes to children's higher level of motivation and independence as learners and lays the foundation for life-long learning by:

- Supporting and feeding children's curiosity that surfaces in their questions of why and how.
- Allowing them to explore and discover.
- Helping them extend their knowledge and skills by modeling an inquisitive approach to content.
- Encouraging them to apply their knowledge and skills in new situations.

All of these are complex and far-from-easy roles the adult should assume in relation to children in scaffolding their development.

The experimental implementation of the Step by Step child-centered education model started in Moldova (the former Soviet republic) in 1994, at the same time as it was introduced in 11 other Central and Eastern European countries. The implementation began with 12 classrooms of four- to five-year-old children in five kindergartens. Both for the team of Step by Step NGO that viewed its mission in supporting democratic changes in the country's education system and for the pioneer teachers who embarked on this reform, these efforts required a considerable personal and professional change inside a system that was still requiring teachers to follow the rigid regulations of a highly prescriptive curriculum. The support offered by Open Society Institute in New York and the Child Development Center of Georgetown University in Washington, DC, in creating model classroom environments with activity centers and in training teachers, respectively, had a decisive role in producing a breakthrough in the authoritarian educational practices.

The positive response from parents and teachers received at the end of the first year exceeded all expectations. As a result, 60 new classrooms across the country joined in the following year, equally benefiting from material support



in transforming the physical environment and in training teachers in child-centered methodology. The strategy of scaling up the experiment, supported by the Education Ministry of Moldova, presupposed the inclusion of at least two classrooms per kindergarten in order to strengthen the capacity of the change agents and to enlarge the demonstrational basis.

In 1996, the first generation of Step by Step children was ready to move on to the primary school at the age of seven, and requests were made by parents and teachers to ensure children's transition to school. As a result, a new cycle for Step by Step's program began. The implementation strategy followed in

the first 11 schools proved successful: support in creating model classroom environments and the development of human capacities.

After two years in the experimental phase, the Ministry of Education recognized Step by Step's program as a model of formative education, the latter being targeted through the new Law on Education. Despite the deep economic crisis that began in the late nineties and the considerable setback in the education system reform that followed, the number of classrooms implementing Step by Step child-centered methodology has substantially increased. This is a direct result of the synergy of partnerships between Step by Step NGO and some important

internationally-supported projects targeting (mostly rural) schools in Moldova. Several kindergartens and schools were identified as training centers with demonstration classrooms and mentor teachers ready to offer technical support to the beginning teachers. The demonstration classrooms are also used for student teachers' practicum experiences. Efforts were also made through special training for faculty from teacher training colleges and universities to reconsider how pre-service teacher training could better align with the requirements of child-centered practice.

The many years of Step by Step experience in the country were recently translated into the new ECD Teacher Standards and Early Learning and Development Standards — national documents that are grounded in child-centered philosophy.

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Kindergarten-primary school #152 in Chisinau, the capital city, is the main Step by Step training center in the country. The four kindergarten and 14 primary classrooms serve as observation sites for in-service teacher training. Valentina Lungu, the school principal, is also a Step by Step Master Trainer. Nine of the school teachers received international ISSA (International Step by Step Association) certificates after a thorough certification process based on ISSA Pedagogical Standards.

For a couple of days in October, the Step by Step team was happy to have Bonnie Neugebauer as a very special guest. Bonnie visited the kindergarten-primary school and met with the children and teachers. In one fourth grade classroom Bonnie taught children how to make origami cranes and told them the story of the girl from Hiroshima and what the cranes symbolized (*Sadako and the thousand paper cranes*, New York: Puffin, 1999). The students were also very impressed with the story about the 1,000 cranes Bonnie and the children made and took to the office of a Congressman with a message of hope for peace on behalf of all the children. Bonnie remarked how eagerly the students got involved in making their cranes, helping and supporting each other. Bonnie also had a chance to visit a lesson in a first grade and to interact briefly with children in a kindergarten classroom, allowing her to get a sense of how the concept of child-centeredness is translated into practice by Step by Step teachers in Moldova.