

# **„Maria Montessori’s Theory of Cosmic Education and the State of Education in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century” – On the International Montessori Convention at the University of Belgorod (Russia), May 15-18<sup>th</sup> 2006**

Report from the International Montessori Convention on “Cosmic Education”, held from May 15-18<sup>th</sup> at the University of Belgorod (Russia)

*Harald Ludwig , Rainer Völkel, Petra Wöbcke-Helmle / Thomas Helmle*

## **1. How did Belgorod become the capital of Montessori pedagogy in Russia – a short history (H. Ludwig)**

Montessori instruction was first introduced to Russia in 1993, when Russian pedagogues were invited to international teacher training courses in North Rhine-Westphalia. The courses were part of a programme established by Dr. Hubert Göbbels (Düsseldorf) from the state government of North Rhine-Westphalia and provided for in a contract between North Rhine-Westphalia and the Russian Ministry of Education. They were held in Soest and organized by the North Rhine-Westphalian Teacher Education Institute. Initially the task force heading the courses included mostly teachers and kindergarten workers from Montessori schools and kindergartens in North Rhine-Westphalia.<sup>1</sup> But by request of the Russian Ministry the team was later joined by members of the University of Münster’s Institute for Montessori Instruction. In Russia universities play a much greater part in the training of teachers and pedagogues than in Germany. The programme consisted of biannual meetings, seminars, conferences and mutual visits to Belgorod and to North Rhine-Westphalia respectively.

The Montessori Centre of the University of Belgorod was founded in 1994 by order of the Russian Federation’s Ministry of Education. Belgorod is a fast-growing city with a population of about 450.000, situated about 400 miles south of Moscow. The activities of the Centre were strongly supported by their official supervisor for the Ministry of Education, formerly Professor Nazarowa, now Professor Kostikowa. The Centre, which is directed by Professor Nadeshda Tarassenka, is supposed to take a leading role in incorporating Montessori pedagogy into the Russian education system.

In 1995 the University of Belgorod and its German partners organized the first convention on Montessori pedagogy in Belgorod, which already made clear that the cosmic education, with its progressive, nature-friendly, peace-oriented and cross-cultural aspects, was the element the University would most emphasize in its own implementation of Maria Montessori’s educational philosophy. The Montessori Centre at the University of Belgorod took up Montessori’s ideas on a universal syllabus and strove to insert them into its own syllabus with the help of several experts, at the same time seeking to connect them to the country’s own intellectual traditions – like the school of Russian nature philosophers – and to incorporate them into Russian culture. An anthology of texts and articles published after the convention very clearly attests to this innovative approach.<sup>2</sup>

Apart from the regular meetings taking place as part of the training programme there were also prolonged study visits from members of the Russian Montessori Centre at the University of Münster. As a result of the cooperation the German book “Basic tenets of Montessori

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. Spengler, Ulrich: Montessori – a tender sprout in Russia (in German), in: MONTESSORI 31 (1993), H.2/3, pp. 76 et seq.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. The educational philosophy of Maria Montessori (in Russian), published by the Russian Ministry of Education and the University of Belgorod, Belgorod 1995, (featuring articles by Russian and German authors); also: Holtstiege, H./Ludwig, H.: Montessori pedagogy in Russia is making progress, in: MONTESSORI 34 (1996), H.2, pp. 61-64.

pedagogy”, edited by the University of Münster’s Montessori experts Professor Paul Oswald and Professor Günter Schulz-Benesch (1999), has been translated into Russian.<sup>3</sup> In October 1999 the two universities and their partners from the Teacher Education Institute in North Rhine-Westphalia organized the second Montessori convention in Belgorod. Again Maria Montessori’s theory of a “Cosmic Education” was the central issue. The Russians had made a lot of progress in putting this theory into practice. In numerous schools and kindergartens lessons were held according to Montessori principles and integrating free work into distinct class projects emerged as the special trait of Russian Montessori instruction. It was plain to see that Belgorod had become the “capital” of Montessori pedagogy in Russia. Again a collection of articles was put together to attest to this development.<sup>4</sup>

North Rhine-Westphalia stopped its Montessori-oriented teacher training programme in 1999. Cooperation between the Montessori Centres at Münster and Belgorod continued, however. In April 2000 the two Centres corroborated their cooperation in an official contract, which has just been renewed for another five years in 2005. Both Professor Kostikowa from the Russian Ministry of Education and the university board at Belgorod support this cooperation.<sup>5</sup>



Signing of the cooperation contract at the Montessori Centre:  
Professor Ludwig, Professor Tarassenko, Professor Wittenbruch (from left to right)

In autumn 2001 a seminar on Montessori pedagogy was held at the University of Belgorod, which Montessori experts from the University of Münster took part in. It lasted one week and evaluated the progress made so far with Montessori instruction at schools and children’s houses in Belgorod. In the academic year 2001/2002 DAAD-scholarship holder Andrej Dorofeev spent two semesters at the Montessori Centre in Münster, doing research for his PhD thesis paper on Montessori pedagogy. Mr. Dorofeev successfully finished his thesis on “The implementation of Maria Montessori’s educational philosophy in preschools and schools in North Rhine-Westphalia” in 2003.<sup>6</sup>

In the autumn of 2002 three members of the Montessori Centre at Belgorod attended a week-long trainer’s seminar at the University of Münster. In the spring of 2004 Professor Ludwig, Reinhard Fischer (PhD) and PhD student Esther Grindel participated in a seven-day

<sup>3</sup> In the meantime the articles collected in the booklet “Cosmic Education” have also been translated.

<sup>4</sup> Cf. Maria Montessori’s educational philosophy and the current state of education (in Russian), published by the Russian Ministry of Education and the University of Belgorod, Belgorod 1999 (featuring articles by Russian and German authors).

<sup>5</sup> Cf. Tarassenko, Nedeshda/Emeljanova, Galina: On the cooperation of the Montessori Centres of the Universities of Münster and Belgorod (in Russian), in: Fischer, Rheinhard / Heitkämper, Peter (ed.): Montessori pedagogy: current and international developments, series: Impulses of reform pedagogy (in German), ed. H. Ludwig, vol. 10, Münster: Lit-Verlag 2005, pp. 252-255.

<sup>6</sup> Cf. the summarized version: Dorofeev, Andrej: The implementation of Maria Montessori’s educational philosophy in preschools and schools in North Rhine-Westphalia – from an outsider’s viewpoint, in: Fischer, Rheinhard / Heitkämper, Peter (ed.): Montessori pedagogy: current and international developments, series: Impulses of reform pedagogy (in German), ed. H. Ludwig, vol. 10, Münster: Lit-Verlag 2005, pp. 437-458.

Montessori-seminar at the University in Belgorod. In May 2005 Professor Nadeshda Tarassenko spent a ten-day study visit at the Montessori Centre in Münster and in October 2005 contributed with Doctor Andrej Dorofeev to a day of seminars and other academic events at the Centre in Münster. These academic visits helped organize the third Montessori Convention at Belgorod, held from May 15-18<sup>th</sup> 2006 under the auspices Montessori Europe on “Maria Montessori’s Theory of Cosmic Education and the State of Education in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century”.

A report from the international Montessori Convention by Rainer Völkel can be read in the following. Also a field report on how Montessori pedagogy is put into practice in Belgorod by Petra Wöbcke-Helmle and Thomas Helmle.

## **2. *Report from the International Montessori Convention on “Cosmic Education”, held from May 15-18<sup>th</sup> at the University of Belgorod in Russia (R. Völkel)***

Travelling to Russia still involves quite a host of bureaucratic procedures, so any trip there has to be scrupulously planned and prepared by a lot of paperwork. Once all immigration formalities have been complied with, however, a remarkably friendly and hospitable country welcomes you. And you’re glad for all the help you get – because suddenly everyone around you speaks a strange language and you can’t read any street signs or restaurant menus any more. Foreigners attending the International Montessori Convention at Belgorod were spared these difficulties. From the minute we put foot on Russian ground we were always accompanied by a “Russian angel”, a native guide and interpreter who helped us overcome all language barriers.

The Montessori Convention on “Cosmic Education” had attracted the interest of numerous participants and guests. They came from Canada, Germany, the Netherlands, Poland, the Ukraine, and Belarus – even a delegation from South Korea took part. Russians participants came from all parts of the big country and many members of the university and guests from the region of Belgorod also attended the Convention. The number of places and institutions where the Montessori Method is practiced in Russia is surprisingly high, even though these places are spread all over the country, are not of homogenous quality and in many cases are only loosely associated with each other. The Russians put high value on a good education, not just as a way to get ahead in life but as something valuable in itself. One of the more important reasons why the Montessori Method is becoming increasingly popular in Russia is that the people there feel that it’s helping to modernize the country’s educational practices and policies. Thus it hardly comes as a surprise that the method is gaining more and more followers – in spite of massive opposition from the authorities and rigid state regulations. But more on this in the field report following this report.

The question of educational policies played a big part in the greeting sent by Dr. Meisterjahn-Knebel, President of Montessori Europe, under whose auspices the convention officially took place. The convention was hosted by the University of Belgorod, a dynamic, fast-growing city rebuilt after World War II, 700 kilometres south of Moscow and close to the Ukrainian border. The University likes to speak of itself as a “University of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century” and puts great emphasis on its openness and the educational concepts it is based on. The Faculty of Education sees child-centred learning as an important modern feature of the Montessori Method and promotes it both in teaching and practice.

The Convention was organized by Professor Tarassenko (University of Belgorod) and Professor Ludwig (University of Munster). The two universities and their faculty have been cooperating for several years now in the field of Montessori-based pedagogy. On the 15<sup>th</sup> of

May professor Leonid J. Djattschenko, president of the University of Belgorod, officially inaugurated the Convention, which about 300 people took part in. Renilde Montessori had sent warm words of greeting, which – like all other lectures and speeches – were translated into Russian, English and German. In her opening speech, Ms. Meisterjahn-Knebel explained the principal ideas of global educational reform and the importance of the Montessori Method for this process.

The plenary session on May 16<sup>th</sup> started with two further speeches on general subjects. Ms. E. Eckert gave a lecture on the historical origins of the cosmic education, a subject on which she has written several papers, and Professor Ludwig talked about cosmic education and the importance of its theoretical concepts for the Montessori Method. In the afternoon speeches on a holistic approach to character development as one of the main goals of the cosmic education and “free work” as its basic teaching method were offered in two different sets of lectures given by international and Russian scholars.

The third day commenced with speeches in the plenary chamber. Unfortunately Professor Holtstiege was unable to give her speech herself. Her paper was read out by Ms. Eckert. In her lecture, Professor Tarassenko, head of the Faculty of Education and the Montessori Centre at the University of Belgorod, offered a modern analysis of the philosophical and methodological principles underlying the cosmic education. A German version of her lecture will appear in the German magazine DAS KIND. The morning session ended with a lecture by Daniel Jutras, Ph.D. at the University of Ottawa and Director and Master Teacher of the Canadian Teacher Education Institute.

In the afternoon there was a wide variety of workshops to take part in. There were three different lectures in Russian on various aspects of the cosmic education, its teachings and methods. Petra Wöbcke-Helmle and Thomas Helmle hosted a workshop on how the cosmic education can be put into practice in schools and offered many practical examples and useful materials for this. For participants who work in a Children’s House or in a Montessori school Irmtraud Völkel presented a Montessori project from Wiesbaden, a children’s farmyard where activities are guided by the principles of the cosmic education. Under the title “Watching Children – Understanding Children” Rainer Völkel hosted a workshop on Maria Montessori’s teachings concerning the observation of children’s behaviour.

On May 18<sup>th</sup>, the last day of the Convention, Professor Issajev gave the final lecture of the programme, titled “A teacher’s professional culture and Maria Montessori’s concept of cosmic education”. In the afternoon the programme again featured a variety of workshops, partly picking up on subjects discussed in the workshops the day before. In a final discussion with the University’s vice-president the foreign participants had a chance to talk about the impressions they gathered at the Convention and the current state of Montessori instruction in Russia.

The university promised to continue its support for the recognition of “Montessori” as an official branch of study and to further build up on the already very favourable conditions created for Montessori pedagogy at Belgorod. The university’s own Montessori centre will play an important part in supplying vocational training and teaching materials for the cosmic education.

The university also wants to take steps towards the integration of Montessori pedagogy into its teacher training courses and make it one of the major focus points of the curriculum. The vice-president asked the foreign guests to support this process with their knowledge and experience.

Parallel to the lectures and workshops the Convention featured several cultural events, and also a visit to the most recently created division of the university, which has a new social-theological focus. There we had a very interesting discussion with several orthodox priests, who helped us better, understand the role of the church in Russia.

The participants usually covered a workday of 12-15 hours, exhausting at times, but always very interesting. They made many new acquaintances, which will further strengthen international cooperation of Montessori teachers and pedagogues. The Russian participants were particularly glad to have the opportunity to show how much progress they have made with their own Montessori projects and discuss their achievements with their guests. This goal has been fully accomplished. The Convention was extensively covered by the local press and Russian television.

We heartily thanked the many Russian colleagues who had guided us through the days with unswerving hospitality, who picked us up at the airport, escorted us on the long train ride to Belgorod and provided for a safe and sound return-trip at the end of our stay. Special thanks and many compliments were paid to Professor Tarassenko for her excellent organization and management of this rather large Convention.

Russia may not be a member of the European Union, but it certainly is a part of Europe. The international and global orientation of Montessori pedagogy encourages a broadly based cooperation of its supporters, across all countries and borders. Like no other in the Montessori syllabus, the subject of "Cosmic Education" lends itself to continue this cooperation in the future.

### ***3. Concerning pedagogic practices in the educational environment of the University of Belgorod's Montessori Centre***

*(Petra Wöbcke-Helmle / Thomas Helmle)*

On Monday, May 15<sup>th</sup> 2006, we had the chance to look at several Montessori-oriented kindergartens and schools at Belgorod. Each of our groups visited a kindergarten and also a school.

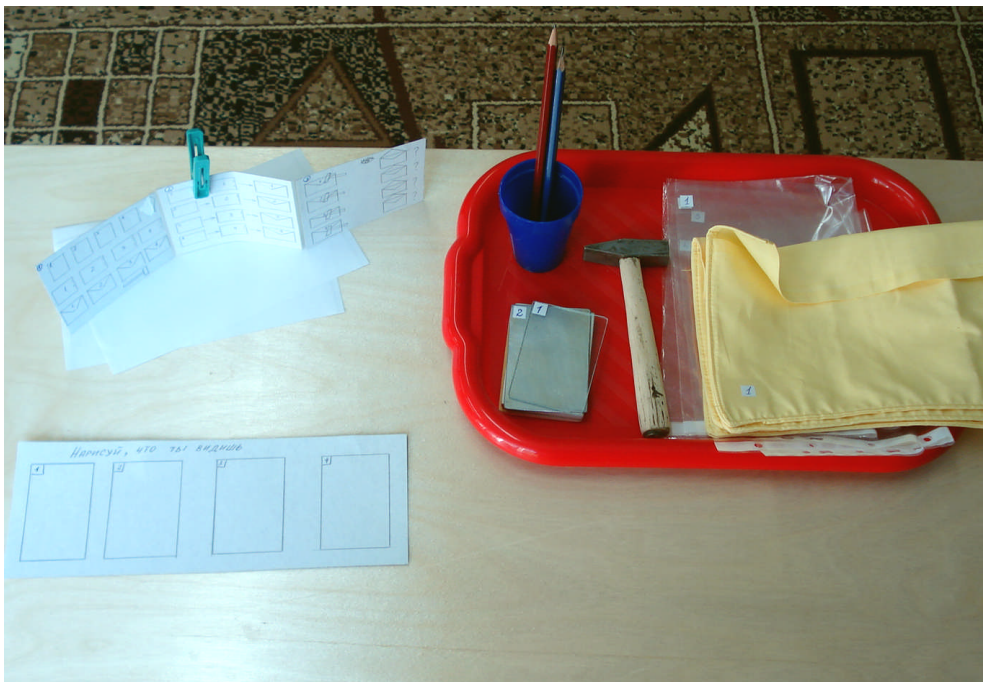
In Kindergarten No. 73 for instance we attended an "introductory lesson" on the subject of glass. The lesson was conducted with one half of a kindergarten group of six-year-olds. The teacher started the introduction with an exercise involving the sounds that can be produced by glass and then went on to give a rather lengthy speech on the history of glass. Afterwards the children were asked to conduct various experiments involving glass, which were very well prepared and very well structured.



Picture 1: Kindergarten

The children were assigned their tasks and were not allowed to freely choose the experiments they wanted to conduct. When they were done the teacher guided them through a computer presentation on the production and properties of glass and on some further historical aspects of the subject. The teacher explained that the children were allowed to do “free work” on their experiments for a certain period of time. The class would then finish its work on the subject with a lesson in which the results of the experiments were discussed.

Our group from Germany was struck by how disciplined the children went about their work and how nimble they were with their hands and fingers. Most of the children in the group could read fluently.



Picture 2: One of the experiments: On the fragility of different kinds of glass



In a discussion which – as always in Belgorod – was held in an atmosphere of great hospitality we then had the chance to make comments on the lesson and to ask further questions.

After the discussion we visited school No. 39, where the principal showed us a presentation on the size, organization and achievements of the school (teacher awards, school competitions, student awards, etc.).

After this we had the chance to watch part of a lesson involving “free work”. A smaller group of nine-year-olds worked separately and quietly with materials they had gotten from another room (the classroom itself was not equipped with any of the materials). Later we learned that the weekly syllabus of the school included only two hours of free work (all Montessori-oriented schools and classes in the region feature only three hours of free work per week).



Picture 3: A short phase of free work: working with planets, the evolution of life ...

Free work evidently is not the main focus of Montessori instruction in the region. Instead, the different parts of the cosmic education are integrated into separate projects and then linked with each other. After the lesson we had the chance to extensively examine the results of one of these projects.

Aside from its usual educational work, the school also showed us the work of its local history work group (ever since the Perestroika “patriotic history” has become a very popular subject in Russia). Wearing traditional costumes which will soon be on exhibition in the small local-history-museum of the school the head of the group, his father and two more students played historical instruments and entertained us with traditional songs and dances of the region.



Picture 4: Patriotic history workshop

Back in the classroom we were then presented with the results of the project “Ancient Cultures – Modern Times”. The children were dressed up as historical characters from old Egypt, Greece, etc. The teacher explained the difference between “nature” and “culture”, asked the children what they thought was part of “culture” and what was not, and then took them on a journey back in time, to the emerging cultures of the late stone age.

Three of the boys presented their work on the subject of locomotion and transportation, showing us drawings of donkeys, horses, camels and giving short speeches on the invention of the wheel, of horse-drawn carts and other modes of transportation.



Picture 5: Locomotion and transportation workshop

When the presentation moved on to cars and trains the children spread out toys and drawings on the floor and arranged them according to whether they thought they belonged to



ancient cultures or modern times. Eventually two long rows were created treating a whole host of topics, including locomotion/transportation, world views, food, language/writing, philosophy/religion, clothes, tools/instruments, living together/politics, art and music – in short, all of the classic subjects of the Montessori diagram “Man’s basic needs”.

The presentation lasted almost one and a half hours and finished with an exercise on how old cultures relate to modern times, in which the objects and pictures in the rows were connected by threads of string. In all cases, the children came to the conclusion that the ancient cultures had laid the foundation for our modern times.

Our group was impressed by the excellent quality of the presentation. It was very well structured and contained many opportunities for the children to act out what they were learning. The group who presented the topic “living together/politics” for instance staged a trial in the Polis of ancient Athens, in which all children had to act as a jury and give their verdict on whether the defendant was guilty or not by using black and white stones. On giving their verdict they each had to explain their reasons for having decided the way they did. We were not able to understand the verdicts in full (a short version of each was translated by the teacher), but the way the children presented their arguments was very impressive and surely easy to follow for the other children in class.

We had only a small glimpse into how Montessori methods are employed in Belgorod. But in looking back the following three general conclusions can perhaps be made:

1. Free work is practiced much less extensively than in Germany: For political reasons the school cannot include more than two to three hours per week in the syllabus. The free work that is being done appears to aim at short-term results that have to be voiced in a definite and concrete manner in the classroom. In Germany free work is practiced in a more indirect manner and aims at long-term rather than short-term results.
2. There is no mixing of age-groups in the classroom (which also has to do with school politics).
3. While in German-speaking countries all the other subjects that make up the concept of the cosmic education apart from mathematics and language are rarely touched upon, they were worked out in full detail in the kindergartens and schools our group visited in Belgorod.

#### **4. Conclusion**

*(H. Ludwig, R. Völkel, P. Wöbcke-Helmle / Th. Helmle)*

The 2006 International Montessori Convention at Belgorod was a formidable symposium once more excellently organized by Professor Tarassenko, her team from the Montessori Centre and the competent instructors from the Foreign Language Department. As far as the situation of Montessori instruction in Belgorod is concerned the Convention demonstrated that the city is not only rightfully called the “capital” of Montessori pedagogy in Russia, but has also found its place within the international Montessori movement, which in 2007 will celebrate its centenary. Thanks to the participation of Montessori Europe, Belgorod was able to present its work to an international audience. The Montessori work being done in Belgorod clearly proved to be a significant and autonomous contribution to the scientific development and practical implementation of Montessori pedagogy, deserving international respect.

The directors of Belgorod's university board have realized this as well and support the work of the Montessori Centre. Special thanks are due to the president of the University of Belgorod, Professor Leonid Djattschenko, as well as to scientific prorector Professor Tatjana Dawydenko and the Department of International Cooperation. It was great to see that the directors of the educational board of the city of Belgorod, especially Mr. Stanislav P. Timofejew, have realized how valuable Montessori work is for the education system and want to support its further growth. And of course particular thanks are due to all the teachers and kindergarten workers doing valuable work for the welfare of the children in accordance with the ideas formulated by Maria Montessori. We thank everyone for this Montessori Convention, which has given us great opportunities for discussing our ideas and catching a glimpse of the pedagogical work being done in Belgorod. We are all looking forward to continuing our cooperation in the future.

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