

UNC World View
Connecting Conversations: A World View Podcast

Episode 4 – Victoria Isac – The North Carolina-Moldova Partnership

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Interview by Charlé LaMonica, Director of UNC World View

Charlé LaMonica: We're joined today by Victoria Isac. Victoria Isac is an English teacher at Mihai Eminescu school gymnasium in Cantemir, Moldova, she's also the school psychologist. Victoria is the co-founder of the Center for Training and Educational Development in Cantemir. She is a teacher that does it all; we all know teachers that do it all. And, Victoria knows North Carolina quite well. In 2016, she was one of the first Moldovan teachers to join the North Carolina-Moldova school partnership project and partnered with Queens Creek Elementary in Swansboro. As one of the most active educators in the school partnership, Victoria was selected in 2017 by the U.S. Embassy to participate in the Open World Leadership Program and to visit North Carolina, finally meeting face to face with teachers she collaborated with over Skype. I learned that when Victoria visited Queens Creek Elementary, the school organized a special celebration Moldova day at their school. The mayor welcomed the delegation, the students performed, the local media attended and now Cantemir and Swansboro are working on a sister city partnership.

Victoria, Welcome to World View. You're a dear friend to North Carolina, and it gives me great pleasure to welcome you to our podcast today. We're particularly interested in exploring experiences teachers are having around the world as they create different kinds of classrooms during COVID-19. But before we get started talking about your teaching practice, would you please tell us a little bit about yourself and why you became a teacher.

Victoria Isac: Thank you. Welcome everybody. So I, as you said, I am an English teacher, also a school psychologist from 2006 and I have 14 years of teaching experience. So why I became a teacher: this is a very interesting question. I became a teacher, but especially an English teacher because I have my own way to see the world, and I want to make the others to discover the world through the English language. Also I want to demonstrate that to my students that you cannot be only a teacher, but also you can be a leader, so you can bring all kinds of different projects in your community and of course during implementing these projects, my right hand are my students.

CL: I can just imagine your students sitting there with you dreaming up these ways to change the world for the better. So, can you please describe to us your school and the makeup of the students you teach?

VI: Yes. Gymnasium Mihai Eminescu school from our town is the biggest school from Cantemir district with 463 students. In our school we have elementary grades and

also secondary grades. It's a big school, students are not only from town, but also from a nearby villages.

CL: How are they transported to your school if they're from nearby villages?

VI: We have two school buses. So in the morning, they can come to our school with the school buses and after the classes they go back, also with the school buses, but also parents come and bring the children in the morning. Also, they take them back home.

CL: When you were face to face, how many students are in your classroom?

VI: For example, if the one class is from 25 students, we divided the class so a part goes to French language and a part comes to my English language. So I can say, I have from 12 students to 17 students.

CL: Oh, I see. So in your classroom setting, when the pandemic began, how did things change? Have you been teaching face to face this spring or did you all go remotely as well?

VI: Of course remotely as well. Online teaching. But for the first time, everything that is new. There are some complications. You know, you cannot accept everything. But with time, we adapted, me and also my students. So, we started to think, what kind of online tools should we use? What kind of online tools do I know and my students do not know? And especially I have second rate, they have to be taught by their parents how to use it. So it was not so easy, but I can say now that we did it. We created this partnership between me, teachers, my students and also the parents. So I can say it's the best partnership ever. In order to finish the school year. And I can say that we did it.

CL: That is so exciting to hear. Yeah, the real partnership between the parents and the teachers as well.

VI: We had to establish new behaviors, new rules. For example, how to stay. They had to stay a lot of time in front of the computer. So this is not so good for their health. Also, not too close to the camera, the microphone. This is also a challenge for us. But we can say we established, for example, during my English classes, I told my students, I am waiting from you this kind of behavior, this, this, this. Yes, we did it.

CL: How did your students really react to working remotely. How did it change over time because, first I think the whole world thought it was going to be a shorter amount of time and then we realized that it was much larger than we had imagined. I'm thinking that was the same in Moldova.

VI: Yes, of course. The children, were used to use computers and internet for later and not so much for learning. So they needed time to adapt to online teaching. They

were not ready. And actually we also were not ready. But as I said before, we established rules. What kind of online tools to use. We finished the school year and we have positive results.

CL: What a great end result. That is a great end result for you. So what are the opportunities that you're finding now based on that experience?

VI: Until COVID-19 we had no online education for children in Moldova. And especially outside capital city Chişinău. I can say now that we started to have a digital infrastructure in the Republic of Moldova. So now I can say that it's possible. So what opportunities I find, for example, for students that are gifted. So in the future, if we are going back to traditional teaching, online teaching can be used for gifted students. Also for students with special needs that cannot be present. During the classes or for those students that they have a medical problem so for a short period of time, they cannot be in the classroom. So yes, this was a big lesson for us. Also, it was not something positive at the beginning, but now I can say that from this pandemic period, we can say we learned a lot.

CL: What are the challenges—I mean obviously teachers all over the world have had challenges with their students in creating new lessons, in connecting with them, and different problems came to the forefront. What are the challenges that you've had with your students?

VI: First of all, not all of my students had a computer, tablet or smartphone. This is the first. Then the second, internet connection. Not all of them can afford to pay for the Internet. The other one, if they have, for example, computer and internet connection, the sound, the quality of sound. The possibility to connect. For example, I can say from my own example. I am a teacher. I have two kids. So we had to have three computers, and one internet connection was not enough. So we bought another one in order to have the best internet connection for us to do this, for me teaching and for my kids learning. Also, not all of my students knew how to use these online tools. So first of all we needed time to adapt, how to use it. For parents also they had to be together with their children in order to demonstrate how to use these online tools. So these are the main or the most important struggles that we had during this period of time.

CL: And those are, once again, struggles worldwide. We've seen those same struggles in North Carolina. And I'm just wondering in terms of the students that did not have access, what happened as a result of the students not having access?

VI: We use the phone. We call them. During this period, we used only the textbooks that we had from our Ministry of Education. Not something else. We do not use it because we wanted everybody to have the same, for example, English text, English exercise, and that's it. So for example, I call my one of my students and said, "Open the book at page, for example, 14, have a look at the text. Underline the word that you don't know. The words that you don't know you can find at the end of the book

in the vocabulary and so on. First of all, let me translate it for you, for you in order to understand.” So we did this using the phone.

CL: Well, it's clear to me that you built relationships with your students over time so when this happened in the spring, you knew those students as well and were able to adapt and I'm sure that their parents were most grateful to your work. Because there was really that one to one connection with your students.

VI: Yes, of course.

CL: So as we as we think about it, and the work that you have done throughout the spring and now your school year has ended. How do you connect Moldova to the world through the North Carolina Moldova teaching partnership moving forward? And how do you see us working together for students in both of our countries?

VI: First of all I want to say that North Carolina has a special place in my heart because until 2016 I knew the USA and the 50 states, and that's it. But after that I have discovered, North Carolina, and especially North Carolina educational project partnership. So for me until 2016 I was just the English teacher that teaches English. And that's it. But now I am *the* English teacher that connects with students from North Carolina. So in a way, I am specially my school. So I always try to organize my English lesson different, but this partnership for real makes my English lessons the special and different. So in the future, of course, we can continue, because it's online teaching and yes, we can continue. This partnership was the best thing that could happen for me, not only for my students because this partnership is like ongoing professional development because every year I discover North Carolina, I discovered my abilities to connect to others from different parts of the world. So it's the same I can say for my students. So in the future, yes, we can continue and we can use online tools in order to connect to our partners from North Carolina.

CL: Victoria, I understand that you have a very special corner of your classroom. One of our teachers that visited you in Moldova through the World View Study Visit last year mentioned something very special. Could you elaborate on that?

VI: Yes, yes indeed. I have a special corner and I named this corner “North Carolina Reading Corner” because I have a lot of books that came to Moldova thanks to this fruitful partnership and I'm very grateful to all of the people that were involved in making this possible, and especially Ms. Elaine Marshall. So during the breaks my kids are not allowed just to stay. They go to the reading corner. They take the book and they read. They give me a lot of a questions regarding “what is this? This is from North Carolina? Can you explain this?” Oh, and sometimes they find even the name of the one of the students that donated that book. And they ask me, “Oh my god, this is the first name or the second name? Can you tell me this is the age? It's a boy or it's a girl? So we discover during the breaks and not only during the English lessons the magic of these books. So I'm very grateful that I have this textbook in my classroom.

CL: Thank you so much, Victoria. And as I'm thinking about it and kind of bringing this all together, this long partnership relationship that North Carolina's had with Moldova, how we've all now gone in the middle of a pandemic together worldwide and how teachers are making such a difference in the life of students and families, as illustrated by what you explained. Can you tell me a little bit, in closing, from your perspective, what value there is for your own students to have a global perspective?

VI: First of all, empathy, diversity, equality. Thanks to this partnership, I can demonstrate to my students that there are people in the world, exactly the same as we are and we are different, but at the same time, we have some similarities together.

CL: Thank you so much, Victoria, for your time today. I think you encapsulated with that the idea of empathy, of diversity, of equality, things that we all want to make sure worldwide that our students have those skill sets to be able to create a better future, is really what teachers want. Every teacher in every country. So I want to thank you so much for your time today as we learned about this really valuable partnership between your school, learned about your best practice, the way in which you pivoted to make sure that your students had what they need, the opportunities and also the challenges that we all share together. And just to underscore how teachers are making this huge difference in a positive way for students. So thank you so much for sharing yourself and your best practice with us today.