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EDUCATIONAL AND CULTURAL MISSION OF SCIENTIST MARIA KITSYUK IN SHAPING THE UKRAINIAN IDENTITY OF DIASPORA CHILDREN

Abstract. The Ukrainian diaspora in the United States has made a significant contribution to the preservation of national identity and the formation of subsequent generations of Ukrainians, who have been nurtured in the traditions of language, culture, and civic engagement. A key element in this process was the establishment of Saturday and Sunday schools dedicated to the study of Ukrainian culture. Among the educators who devoted their lives to advancing Ukrainian education in emigration, a distinguished role belongs to Dr. Maria Kitsyuk, a Ukrainian-American teacher and community activist who served for many years as the director of the School of Ukrainian Studies in Yonkers, New York. She was actively engaged in educational and cultural initiatives of the Ukrainian diaspora in the United States. Diaspora periodicals (*Svoboda*, *Surma*/ *Nova Gazeta*) have highlighted her significant contribution to both the school and community. Her life stands as an exemplary embodiment of dedicated service to the Ukrainian language. At the same time, her worldview reflects a profound sense of national identity and a genuine commitment to Ukrainian education in the diaspora.

Her life is an exemplary embodiment of service to the Ukrainian language, and her worldview reflects a national identity and a genuine concern for Ukrainian education in the diaspora.

Having worked for many years within both the American and Ukrainian educational systems, Dr. Maria Kitsyuk developed her own approaches to teaching English and Ukrainian as foreign languages. In her pedagogical practice, she employed traditional methods, carefully adapting them to the specific context of the American educational environment.

Distinctive features of Dr. Maria Kitsyuk's methodology: the application of comparative analysis (particularly through the study of Ukrainian and American literature, as well as historical figures of Ukraine and the United States); the integration of multicultural discourse in the educational process (incorporating song, embroidery, folk traditions); an emphasis on the development of critical thinking with students engaged in essay writing and classroom discussions; the inclusion of extracurricular activities as an essential component of learning, such as excursions, concerts, and collaboration with Plast scouts.

In the context of a new wave of migration at the turn of the 20th and early 21st centuries, the role of the Ukrainian studies teacher acquired heightened significance and complexity. Educators faced the dual task of integrating newcomer students into the school and cultural environment while simultaneously sustaining the interest of children with varying levels of Ukrainian language proficiency. Through their personal example, as well as their educational and cultural activities, these teachers contributed to shaping the self-awareness of Ukrainian youth abroad and instilling in them a sense of belonging to a great nation.

Keywords: emigration, Ukrainian schooling, Ukrainian youth, mentor, school of Ukrainian studies.

ОСВІТНЬО-КУЛЬТУРНА МІСІЯ НАУКОВИЦІ МАРІЇ КІЦЮК У ФОРМУВАННІ УКРАЇНСЬКОЇ ІДЕНТИЧНОСТІ ДІТЕЙ ДІАСПОРИ

Анотація. Українська діаспора у США відіграла виняткову роль у збереженні національної ідентичності та формуванні наступних поколінь українців, вихованих у традиціях мови, культури та громадянської активності. Важливим чинником цього процесу стало створення суботніх та недільних шкіл українознавства. Серед педагогів, які присвятили своє життя розвитку української освіти в еміграції, особливе місце посідає д-р. Марія Кіцюк - українсько-американська педагогиня й громадська діячка, багаторічна директорка Школи українознавства в Йонкерсі (штат Нью-Йорк); активна в освітніх і культурних ініціативах української діаспори США. Про її роль у школі та громаді пишуть діаспорні видання («Свобода», «Сурма»/ *Nova Gazeta*). Її життя є прикладом служіння українському слову, у світоглядних засадах відображено національну ідентичність і щире вболівання за українську освіту на еміграції.



Працюючи упродовж довгих років у системі американської та української освіти, пані Марія напрацювала власні авторські методики викладання англійської й української мови, як іноземної. У своїй роботі навчальній діяльності Марія Кіцюк використовувала традиційні методи викладання з адаптацією до американського освітнього середовища.

Особливості її методики: використання порівняльного – компаративного аналізу (українська й американська літератури, історичні постаті України та США); мультикультурний дискурс у навчальному процесі (пісня, вишивка, народна традиція); орієнтація на розвиток критичного мислення – учні писали есе, брали участь у дискусіях; позакласна активність як невід’ємна частина навчання (екскурсії, концерти, співпраця з пластунами).

В умовах нової міграції кін. XX – поч. XXI ст. роль учителя школи українознавства посилилася й ускладнилася, адже перед ним постало завдання не лише інтегрувати новоприбулих учнів у шкільне та культурне середовище, а й утримати інтерес до навчання дітей з різними навичками розуміння української мови. Особистий приклад вчителя та освітньо-культурна діяльність формують самосвідомість української молоді за межами України, укорінюють відчуття належності до великої нації.

Ключові слова: еміграція, українське шкільництво, українська молодь, наставник, школа українознавства.

INTRODUCTION

The problem formulation. To comprehend the significance of Dr. Maria Kitsyuk’s contribution, it is essential to analyse the history of the establishment and development of Ukrainian studies education for children across different waves of emigration. A deeper exploration of her pedagogical legacy is vital for understanding how Ukrainian schools in the diaspora not only sustained their existence but also evolved into a crucial factor in shaping national consciousness in emigration.

In the aftermath of World War II, the Ukrainian community in the United States experienced significant expansion due to a new wave of emigration. This development created an urgent need to organise systematic teaching in the Ukrainian language, history, literature, and culture for children. In response, a network of Ukrainian studies schools emerged operating under the auspices of community organisations and parishes. These institutions not only fulfilled an educational mission, but also functioned as centres of cultural preservation and civic education. It was within this context that Maria Kitsyuk’s educational and cultural activities unfolded.

Analysis of recent research and publications. The issue of national education for the younger generation of Ukrainians abroad has been addressed by: L. Bozhuk, I. Bodnarchuk, H. Vashchenko, M. Vasylyk, I. Golovinsky, I. Goncharenko, E. Zharky, V. Zhulkovsky, I. Kuchynska, M. Lomatsy, V. Mats’kiv, T. Mykhailenko, O. Nych, I. Ogienko, T. Ronyak, I. Rudnytska-Yuriychuk, Ye. Fedorenko, V. Yaniv, and others. The specific challenges of teaching the Ukrainian language to children and youth in the diaspora have been the focus of research by B. Azhnyuk, A. Bohdanyuk, M. Deiko, K. Kysilevsky, T. Rybak, S. Romanyuk, and Ya. Rudnytsky, R. Smal-Stotsky, L. Khraplyva-Shchur, Yu. Shevelov and other scholars.

Scholars such as H. Byhar, L. Bozhuk, O. Dzhus, V. Kemin, I. Kizin, I. Mashkova, A. Onkovich, O. Paliychuk, N. Primas, I. Pits, S. Ponomarevsky, S. Romanyuk, I. Rusnak, I. Strazhnikova, H. Filipchuk, M. Chepil, and others have studied the development of Ukrainian schooling abroad.

AIM AND TASKS OF THE RESEARCH

The study aims to reveal the distinctive features of the educational and cultural activities of the prominent figures of pedagogical mastery; to encourage the academic community to engage in the study of the experiences of the founders of Ukrainian schooling in emigration; to unite teaching staff for the purpose of conducting a series of interviews with senior participants in the pedagogical process at specific schools of Ukrainian studies; and to develop materials for compiling bibliographic indexes, which will serve as a reliable source of historical and biographical research on the Ukrainian educational paradigm in the United States.

RESEARCH METHODS

The study employs a range of research methods. Theoretical methods, including analysis, synthesis, generalisation, and classification, play a central role, alongside empirical methods such as observation and the examination of teaching and methodological materials.

RESULTS OF THE RESEARCH

Dr. Maria Kitsyuk represents a generation of Ukrainians who endured the Soviet terror as well as Austrian and German forced labour camps. She earned a Master of Arts in Foreign Language Studies from Hunter College and subsequently obtained a Ph.D. in Linguistics from the City University of New York. Her professional career included teaching English at Lehman College and Ukrainian to adult Americans. In 1993, she participated in the Fulbright Program, where she delivered lectures in English to a group of 25 male students from Kharkiv State University. These students, trained under the Soviet system, were being prepared to work in European and African countries (1993).

Additionally, Dr. Kitsyuk lectured in foreign languages to future English teachers. She compiled workbooks on the Ukrainian language for the 10th and 11th grades, contributed to the preparation of materials for the New York State Regents examinations in Ukrainian, and edited the Jubilee Book marking the 50th anniversary of the School of Ukrainian Studies in Yonkers. Maria Kitsyuk dedicated her education mission to Ukrainian schools in the diaspora (Nova Gazeta / Surma – presentation of a memorial plaque at the School of Ukrainian Studies in Yonkers). She served as the correspondence secretary of the School Board of the Ukrainian Cultural Council of America, worked as a teacher for many years, and acted as an educational advisor in Stamford. Additionally, she directed the School of Ukrainian Studies in Yonkers, New York, for fourteen years. In addition to her pedagogical and organisational activities, she authored the autobiographical book "Maria’s Story of Hope and Survival" (1922) (Kitsyuk, 2022).



Teachers as a bridge between generations. In the United States, teachers in Ukrainian schools were predominantly representatives of the post-war wave of emigration—a period during which these educational institutions were establishing themselves. In subsequent decades, the children of Ukrainian immigrants also joined the teaching staff. Their mission was distinctive: to transmit intergenerational experience. By combining the educational and upbringing functions of the school, teachers provided students with Ukrainian studies, simultaneously cultivating a deep love and respect for the Ukrainian people, their culture, and their homeland. Instruction extended beyond the classroom to include individual conversations, cultural gatherings, communal prayers, and choir performances, all of which reinforced connections between learning and cultural identity.

Maria Kitsyuk had been working in Ukrainian schools in the United States since the 1960s and consistently took an active role in Ukrainian studies programs in New York and the surrounding region.

The principal areas of her educational activities included:

- teaching the Ukrainian language and literature in middle and high school;
- developing instructional materials, including lesson plans, curricula, and extracurricular activities;
- fostering a reading culture by engaging students in literary clubs and Ukrainian book festivals;
- promoting cultural education through the organisation of Shevchenko festivals, Christmas nativity plays, and theatrical performances;
- advancing pedagogical cooperation through active participation in seminars and meetings of Ukrainian studies teachers, as well as the exchange of methodological developments.

With extensive experience in both the American and Ukrainian educational systems, Maria Kitsyuk developed her methods for teaching English and Ukrainian as foreign languages (News12 – 3rd anniversary of the war Community participation in remembering the war). In her pedagogical practice, she employed traditional teaching approaches, carefully adapting them to the American educational environment.

Features of Maria Kitsyuk's Methodology

Several key factors distinguished the methodological approach developed by the educator:

- the use of comparative analysis, particularly in examining Ukrainian and American literature as well as historical figures of both nations;
- the incorporation of multicultural discourse into the educational process through songs, embroidery, and folk traditions;
- an emphasis on the development of critical thinking, with students writing essays and engaging in classroom discussions;
- the integration of extracurricular activities as an essential component of learning, including field trips, concerts, and cooperation with Plast scouts.

Through the consistent application of these approaches, students not only acquired knowledge of the Ukrainian language but also laid the foundations for a sense of national self-awareness.

In the context of the new wave of migration at the turn of the 21st century, the role of Ukrainian studies teachers has become increasingly complex and multifaceted. Educators face the dual challenge of integrating new students into the school and cultural environment, while maintaining the interest in learning among children with different levels of Ukrainian language proficiency. Having arrived in America at the beginning of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, I had the honour of being invited to work at a Ukrainian studies school in Yonkers, NY. During this period, I required professional guidance and support, as teachers in diaspora schools must be multifunctional, serving as teachers, event organisers, psychologists, cultural mediators, and mentors. Dr. Maria Kitsyuk, in her characteristic thoughtful manner, explained the specific aspects of teaching Ukrainian as a foreign language, including the structure of educational programs and challenges related to textbooks (News12 – 3rd anniversary of the war Community participation in remembering the war). The example of such people convinces us that a teacher is not only an educator, but also a bearer and guardian of national identity, a link between the past and future of the Ukrainian people outside their homeland.

Dr. Maria Kitsyuk is the author of the following Ukrainian literature programs for diaspora schools:

1. Ukrainian Literature Program (7th grade) – “The Knight's Era” This structured course, designed for Saturday schools, covers topics related to Kyiv Rus, chronicles, and folk art. It includes introductory texts, discussion questions, and tasks designed to develop students' critical thinking and independent work skills. The program has been implemented in Ukrainian studies schools across the United States.

2. Ukrainian Literature Program (8th grade) – “The New Era” This course addresses literature from the Baroque period and subsequent eras. It provides brief biographical notes on writers, discussion questions, and texts for literary analysis. The program is specifically adapted for diaspora children, taking into account the linguistic characteristics of Ukrainian as a heritage language.

3. Ukrainian Literature Program (10th grade) This course organises context into thematic sections, with a particular focus on the works of Olga Kobylanska. Tasks include creating outlines of literary works, responding to discussion questions, and reviewing brief biographical summaries. The program aims to foster a sense of national identity through in-depth engagement with Ukrainian literary classics. The example of educators such as Dr. Kitsyuk demonstrates that a teacher's role extends beyond instruction: they act as both custodians and transmitters of national identity, serving as a vital link between the historical heritage and future of the Ukrainian community abroad.



Maria Kitsyuk's educational and cultural activities exemplify the multifaceted role of pedagogy in the diaspora. She not only instructed students but also cultivated their understanding of Ukrainian heritage, preserving and transmitting the memory of their homeland to future generations (News12 – 2nd anniversary of the war "I'm a refugee..." about the journey to the US Access mode). We can analyse her contribution across three dimensions: educational, by preparing students proficient in the Ukrainian language and literature; cultural, by promoting Ukrainian traditions among youth; and civic, by fostering the development of active members of the Ukrainian community in the United States.

Despite her advanced age, Dr. Maria Kitsyuk remains actively engaged in self-education. She reads the best works of world literature in their original languages, following recent updates to the Ukrainian spelling (approved in 2024), methods of teaching the native language, and the life of the Ukrainian community in Yonkers. When asked about her current work and research, she responded that she keeps regular contact with her children and grandchildren, closely monitors events in Ukraine, and actively addresses misinformation about the country. For example, she counters claims equating Ukraine with Russia or Kyiv with "Russian". She also challenges long-standing narratives propagated by Russian media, which depict Ukrainians as anti-semitic or collaborators (referring to the so-called Ukrainian Fascist Army) and misrepresent historical events such as parades in Lviv associated with nationalist symbols. Additionally, she refutes assertions that Ukraine prosecutes individuals for their faith or that Rusyns (Lemkos) are ethnically Russian. Dr. Kitsyuk fulfils not only pedagogical, but also educational and missionary functions. Her letter to Timothy Snyder, an American historian and writer, professor at Yale University, is impressive. He is a historian specialising in Eastern Europe, with particular emphasis on the 20th-century histories of Ukraine, Poland, and Russia. His research addresses issues of nationalism, totalitarianism, and the Holocaust. He is a full member of the Shevchenko Scientific Society in the USA. In her analysis of *Bloodlands: Europe Between Hitler and Stalin* (2010), Dr. Kitsyuk respectfully identifies several factual inaccuracies:

- Western Ukraine is represented solely as part of Eastern Poland, neglecting its earlier history within Kyiv Rus;
- passages concerning the Ukrainian Insurgent Army, proudly mentioning her husband Yaroslav, who, together with his brothers, fought for Ukraine's independence against various governments and regimes;
- the coverage of the bloody genocide of the Ukrainian nation is incomplete, as the repressions targeted not only "peasants and Soviet Poles," but also destroyed the Ukrainian intelligentsia, clergy, and other social groups.

A closer examination of Dr. Maria Kitsyuk's intellectual reflections reveals the distinctiveness of her worldview, which transcends any single disciplinary or cultural perspective. As a prominent figure in the Ukrainian diaspora, she has, through her daily efforts, ensured the continuity of national culture in a new environment (Nova Gazeta/Surma – presentation of a memorial plaque at the School of Ukrainian Studies in Yonker). Thus, her educational and social activities have made a lasting impact on preserving Ukrainian identity among young Ukrainians living overseas.

CONCLUSIONS AND PROSPECTS OF FURTHER RESEARCH

Therefore, a Ukrainian teacher in a diaspora school is not just an educator. They are builders of a spiritual bridge between Ukraine and the world. Their personal example and educational and cultural activities shape the self-awareness of Ukrainian youth outside Ukraine and instil a sense of belonging to a great nation. Thanks to such pedagogical mentors, Ukrainian children in emigration have the opportunity not only to learn but also to take pride in being Ukrainian.

Maria Kitsyuk is one of those figures in the Ukrainian diaspora who, through their daily work, ensured the continuity of national culture in a new environment. Her educational and community activities made a significant contribution to preserving Ukrainian identity among young people overseas. Further research into her pedagogical legacy is crucial for understanding how the Ukrainian diaspora school not only survived but also became a significant factor in the development of national consciousness.

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