

Exciting things are happening with the English elementary students across Nunavik this year. Since September 2009, one elementary English class from each village has been participating in a cultural project which has encouraged them to learn about their own culture, reflect on their thoughts and ideas, and will soon permit them to discover their connectedness to other students in Nunavik.

Hello! My name is Sarah Russell. I am the elementary English teacher in Aupaluk. In the spring of 2009, I decided I wanted to compose a school song with my students. The project was scheduled to begin the following school year. In preparation, I contacted the very skilled music/drama/language specialist, Debra Giebelhaus-Maloney, and hired her to assist me with the project, confident that her expertise would serve to further enrich the quality of the song. Thanks to the all-encompassing and large-scale thinking of this amazing lady, combined with my growing enthusiasm for reaching as many children as possible through music, the project grew from the single-village idea to include all fourteen villages and from the composition of a school song to the composition of a song for all of Nunavik. Once many of the details of this exciting idea were confirmed, a teacher in each of the other thirteen villages was contacted and invited to take part in this cultural project with their students. We were ready to roll in the fall of 2009!

From September to December 2009, I introduced the participating teachers to Debra Giebelhaus-Maloney, the lady with the hefty responsibility of regularly connecting with the participants in all fourteen villages! Through SKYPE, phone, and e-mail, Debra connected regularly with the teachers and students, enthusiastic to start building a relationship with all participants, totalling about 150 people.

Debra created lessons that encouraged the students to express themselves in written form, both in English and Inuttitut. Besides meeting the project goals, these lessons also met the KSB curriculum outcomes, therefore directly complimenting material the teachers already needed to cover with their students this year. All of this written work was then submitted to Debra so she could begin preparing possible lyrics for the Nunavik song.

In January 2010, the project took a very exciting turn. Thanks to Debra, as well as to her creative family and very talented friends, the idea of the Nunavik quilt was introduced - the work that will visually unite all fourteen villages. Each village was responsible for decorating four square pieces (representing the land, the animals, the community, and their class) of this sixty-four piece quilt. The finished quilt will then be photographed and turned into a large poster that each school will receive. What's even more interesting is that from this quilt, a beautiful book of about 150 pages will be created. Each quilt piece will be displayed on its own page and will be accompanied by a phrase (in Inuttitut and English) describing the piece of artwork. Each village will also contribute one Inuit legend or story (in both languages) written by the students. Since the quilt will remain in Aupaluk, the book is a wonderful keepsake that everyone involved will receive so they can continue to be proud of the amazing amount of learning that took place this year.

Things are getting even more exciting as the gathering in Aupaluk approaches. This is the final stage of this year-long project and will take place from May 31 – June 4, 2010. Two students and two teachers from each of the thirteen villages will fly to Aupaluk to participate in the recording of the Nunavik song. There will be a variety of community building games, songs, and drumming.

While in Aupaluk, the visiting students (as well as my elementary class) will eat, sleep, create, and play together as one unified group of very interactive and enthusiastic young people. Their excitement about being together will be reflected in the energy they provide in the activities and recording. Along with the Nunavik song, the CD will also include the students reading their Inuit story or legends, with a creative soundscape to enhance the quality of each one. There may also be a few surprises on the CD stay tuned!

The week in Aupaluk, with the students and the teachers from the thirteen other villages, will finish with a "Celebration of Learning" and a community feast. The Nunavik song will have its premier performance, the quilt will be unveiled and donated to Aupaluk (the host community), the students will share their stories and legends with the community, and the students and teachers will each be presented with their own copy of the book and the CD. One large poster of the quilt will be given to each participating school. The students in Aupaluk will return to their respective villages and present this poster to their community. It will be a memorable evening of sharing and celebration, marking the end of an entire years worth of hard work and dedication and hopefully the beginning of a shared excitement for working co-operatively, learning from others, and taking pride in oneself.

This regional project could never have been realized without the generous support of numerous funders. My most sincere and humble thanks is extended to New Paths for Education, Safer Communities, Brighter Futures, Nunaliuqait Ikajuqatigiitut Inuit Association, and Air Inuit for believing in the power of this educationally cultural project. Your belief in the potential of the Nunavimmiut children is remarkable. I am truly grateful.

A very large thank you to all the administration that have supported their teachers involved in this project. Your support is invaluable and greatly appreciated. Thank you also to those schools who have agreed to provide Inuit drums and other varieties of drums for the final recording in Aupaluk.

A sincere thank you to Mr. Andre Dauphin, principal at Taqsakallak School in Aupaluk, who has fully supported this project from the moment I first presented it to him in the spring of 2009, who has taken the time to answer all of my project-related questions, and kept a wonderful sense of humour towards all the challenges and successes of the project. You truly are a remarkable leader.

A very special thank you to all the teachers who trusted in me enough to willingly agree to participate in this adventurous project, who chose to believe in the amazing potential of this idea and the direction of Debra, who committed to SKYPE (even though there were often *many* challenges with the internet connections!), and who remained continually enthusiastic with their students about the project. I admire your dedication and perseverance.

A very warm nakurmiik to all the participating students. Thanks to you, your pure enthusiasm and honesty, the project has become more culturally rich than I think many of us adults could have ever imagined. You have given this project an energy that needs to be shared throughout the schools and communities.

And lastly, a gargantuan thank you to Debra Giebelhaus-Maloney for being the very flexible, forever creative, and amazingly patient fire of force that has devoted all her heart and ingenuity to this project. Your dedication to the project and your continued support of the teachers and students is so very much appreciated by everyone involved.