

# Piciryaramta Elicungcallra: Teaching Our Way of Life through Our Language

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Central Yup'ik is a highly endangered language spoken throughout Southwestern Alaska. In an effort to reverse language shift to English, a number of Yup'ik language immersion schools have been established in the region. However, the immersion and other Yup'ik-medium schools possess few materials rooted in traditional epistemology and cultural practices.

In 2009, the University of Alaska Fairbanks in partnership with the Lower Kuskokwim and Lower Yukon School Districts secured a U.S. Department of Education grant to create linguistically and culturally appropriate materials and to infuse technology into the materials to create opportunities for meaningful, authentic interaction.

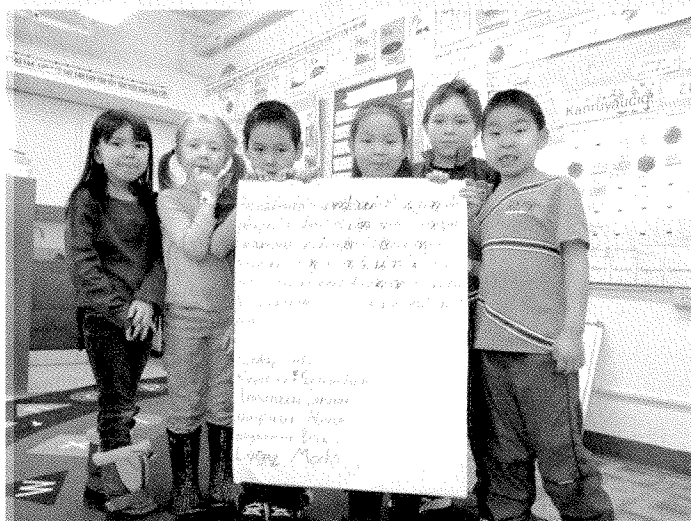
Working within the existing K-4 curriculum (Upingaurluta), teachers are developing materials for topics such as ceremonies and celebrations, traditional games and toys, and survival.

The Piciryaramta Elicungcallra grant emphasizes teaching the Yup'ik culture through the language while meeting state standards in reading, writing, social studies, and science. Teachers have been gathering traditional knowledge to share with their students. They have been talking to elders, local experts, and community members to gather stories and other cultural information that provide the foundation for the lesson plans.

Another major component of this effort is the integration of technol-

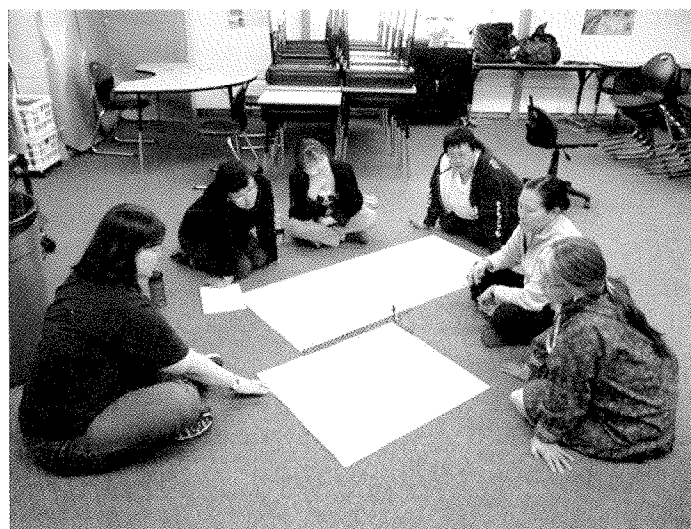
ogy to allow for interaction and collaboration between students as well as teachers. Students in participating classrooms have access to digital cameras and other technologies to create and exchange projects with each other, their parents, and the community. Recently, the local newspaper *Tundra Drums* published the following article written by two participating teachers (Arnaqualluk Westlake and Naniruar Oulton). It highlights the compositions of first grade Yup'ik immersion students:

In the month of February 2011, the first grade students of Ayaprun Elitnaurvik learned about Petugtaryaraq as part of LKSD's Yugtun Upingaurluta curriculum. This particular practice was chosen because it is something that is no longer practiced in our culture and was not taught in school due to the lack of resources and information.



*"The students were excited and engaged when it came time for the Petugtaq lesson."*

*L to R: Ciukaq Cedars, Nugaralria Byrnes, Qugcuun Alexie, Lupigaq Mochin, Kaganag Samuelson, and Ermianguaq Igkurak*



*"Developing materials from scratch takes time, energy, and dedication."*

*L to R: Renee Green, Carol Oulton, Sally Samson, Barb Andrew, Veronica Winkelman and Dr. Theresa John*

According to the elders Paul John, John Alirkar, Susie Angaiak and Ann Fienup-Riordan's book, *Boundaries and Passages: Rule and Ritual in Yup'ik Eskimo Oral Tradition*, Petugtaryaraq (Asking Festival) was practiced by our ancestors either in fall or winter as a form of asking and giving gifts. During this festival, replicas of the small gifts were tied onto heterogeneous sticks. The men chose someone from their group to take the stick house to house for the women to choose what they are able to make or provide. The women did the same to the men.

As part of the lesson, the first grade students drew and colored pictures on a 2 x 2 card. These pictures consisted of piluguq (mukluks), yaqulek (bird), akutaq (Eskimo ice cream), issran (grass bag), atkuk (parka), and various things that our ancestors used to ask for, which were tied onto a stick. As in the past, the students were separated heterogeneously into two groups. Each group had to choose one student to take the stick to the other group. First, the boys chose someone from their group to take the stick to the female side. When the stick was brought to their side, the girls took turns choosing what they were able to make. When all the girls took their cards, they performed the same routine to the boys.

As soon as all the students chose their cards, they drew a replica of the 2 x 2 card on an 11 x 18 paper (traditionally, the men/women would make or provide the real item).

As soon as everyone was done, the boys danced the picture of their requested item. The girls observed the motion and determined what was being asked. Next, the female students who drew the bigger picture stood up to hand the illustration they made for the male student. The girls also followed the same procedure as the boys.

When our ancestors practiced Petugtaq, no one knew who took their requested item until distribution. When the individuals took the requested items from

the stick, the individual would wishfully hope that they did not take what their mom/dad/husband/aunt/uncle had asked for because they lived in the same household and showed much respect to their close relatives. The individuals would much rather hope to wish to take something requested by their teasing cousin.

This was truly a unique lesson that the students whole-heartedly enjoyed. It was a learning experience for all of us. The students were excited and engaged when it came time for the Petugtaq lesson. They stayed within the content when we had them draw their requested item individually. Students were conversing in Yugtun as they were collaborating. As teachers, we were ecstatic that they were able to remember the vocabulary from the lesson, which are not everyday vocabularies. They took their acquired vocabulary and transferred them to their writings. (March 7, 2011)

The lesson plan for this activity will be shared with Yup'ik-medium teachers throughout the region alongside a children's storybook based on elders' teachings about the festival. The story has been recorded and written at a third-grade reading level by Rosalie Lincoln. However, adorned with appropriate pictures, the story is also suitable as a read-aloud introduction to first grade students. Future plans involve the integration of digital storytelling to integrate listening, speaking, reading, and writing in a project-based learning environment. Taken together, these activities put Yup'ik culture and language center stage while addressing specific state standards.

Developing materials from scratch takes time, energy, and dedication. Involving as many stakeholders as possible is important to make sure materials are appropriate, teach-

er-friendly, student-centered, research-based, and conform to school district goals and requirements.

The teachers and scholars participating in this particular effort are spread over an area roughly the size of Arizona. The time we have spent together during weekend and summer work sessions has been invigorating, creative, and productive. Knowing that we are all in it together with a common goal keeps us motivated. One of the most inspirational elements of this effort has been the collaboration among teachers from different schools, villages, and districts. Teachers work in grade-level teams to develop specific lesson plans and in multi-grade level groups to address articulation.

As we sometimes struggle to bridge Yup'ik culture and academic standards, we have found stories to be a great place to start. These stories embody cultural values through language. As we make sense of the stories through listening, reading, speaking, and writing, we create opportunities for meaningful exchanges.

Giving and receiving feedback has been essential in creating lesson plans. As we are heading into the second half of the three-year grant, we will make more time to share lesson plans with each other. As the teachers are implementing their new lesson plans and materials, we continue to share lessons learned with each other and continuously refine our materials.

