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## Singing, service and language revival

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For the Arctic Sounder

No one on the North Slope denies the importance of learning to speak our ancestral languages but learning languages takes time and dedication and learners often feel overwhelmed or discouraged. Ideally, students would learn in an immersion setting, but that's not what we have on the North Slope, and without an immersion setting, progress is often slow.

In order to learn a language, learners need to use it. The more we can get our students to use the language outside of class the more quickly they'll progress. So as teachers we ask ourselves, "How can we encourage our students to use the language in meaningful and memorable ways? How can we encourage our students to practice what they are learning even when they're not in our classes?"

Learning through song has long been known to improve memory. That's why so many of us learned our multiplication tables or the names of the states with a song. One of the powerful aspects of learning things through songs is that they often get stuck in our heads. In the case of language learning this means that the language is running through our minds even when we aren't consciously thinking about it. I believe in having my students learn songs as one way to learn the language. As an Iñupiaq language learner myself I often wake up in the middle of the night with an Iñupiaq song going through my head, or I'll be driving and catch myself singing in Iñupiaq.

As a teacher I believe that there is power in learning just for the sake of learning, but learning is most powerful when it is used, and more powerful still when it's used to serve. There are many ways to serve while learning the language. For me the most important way to serve is by teaching. Because I believe in the service aspect of learning I look for ways that my students can serve others as they are learning.

My Kiita Learning Community high school students sing with the children attending Uqautchim Uglua, a bilingual language program patterned after the Maori language nests, which conveniently is housed in the same building as Kiita Learning Community. My students and I go twice a week to sing songs that young children love to sing: songs that have a lot of action and movement to them. It isn't always easy to get high school students to get into the actions and movements but it's important that the older students model the way to sing



Kiita Community learning students singing with Uqautchim Uglua class about walrus swimming. Photo by Chrisann Atuqtuaq Justice.

PHOTO PROVIDED

the songs. It's amazing to see how the children watch them and try to mimic everything they do as they do the actions to the songs. As the high school students loosen up and get into the songs with the children they can't help enjoying themselves as well. Student Anya Michael said, "I love going to Uqautchim Uglua because we get to learn with the students and see them. It's really calming. It's good to see their faces every week."

Student Briggetta Leavitt said, "They try to follow along, they enjoy it and love to copy the hand motions. It's so cute."

Student Ahlook Kenton said, "I love being around the kids and teaching them by using music."

Heidi Ahsoak, manager of Uqautchim Uglua said, "The students are always very excited for the Kiita Learning Community Iñupiaq class to come sing and play with them. Our students look up to the Kiita students, which, in hand, encourages them to sing and speak more Iñupiaq. We look forward to participating in more activities within the community in partnership with the Kiita Iñupiaq class."

One of the songs we sing with the younger children helps to teach basic verbs and we all act out the verbs while singing. Another song is about animals doing specific things in specific places. Iñisaurri Aaglu Naomi Ahsoak said, "The students use the verbs and actions while they are playing. I hear 'Kayuktuq nutiktuq nunami.' along with the verb actions. When, in general, we are talking about animals that the students remember the actions that that particular animal does. The students pick it up very well. It makes me very proud that they are picking up the language and using it while they are playing."

My Barrow High School students go to Ipalook Elementary School where they sing with younger children. They have gotten to sing with Lola Tukrook's dual language preschool class; Jacob Calderwell (Mr. C's) first

grade music class and Ahvaiyak Richard's Iñupiaq class. The Barrow High students have loved getting to sing alongside the younger children. Sometimes they have gotten to sing with their younger -siblings, younger cousins or nieces and nephews! They find that so exciting that they talk about it for days afterwards. Some are continuing to teach their younger family members the songs when at home.

Music teacher, Mr. C, said, "the kids loved it. They were talking about it for the rest of the day in their classroom."

Iñupiaq dual language teacher Lola Tukrook says of the exchange, "I really like it because it helps my students open up and not be as scared of strangers. It helps them to not be shy and I see them beginning to do the motions as they sing. I wonder if it will help them to be less shy about interacting at community gatherings as they get older."

Student Qattaq Jady Danner said "I like

singing with the little kids because I like seeing them smile and I love little kids. It is really fun."

Student Pigaaluk Yvonne Sarren said, "I like how the little kids are interested in what we are doing and how interested they are in learning our Iñupiaq language. It just makes me happy that we are teaching them our language and traditions while they're still young."

One of the difficult aspects of language learning is similar to performance anxiety. You have to take risks in order to practice what you are learning. That can be one of the toughest aspects for my students. I hope that as they work with younger children they will get over some of their anxiety about using the language with others. I also hope that the experiences working with younger children will get some of my students to seriously consider becoming teachers themselves. One of my students, Jimmie Mingok Tuckfield, is now studying at Uqautchim Uglua and is considering becoming an Iñupiaq teacher. Another former student, Brittany Nayakik is taking teacher preparation courses at Iñisaurri, and is also considering becoming an Iñupiaq teacher.

Learning to speak Iñupiaq well takes time, courage and dedication and the rewards of being able to serve others as you are learning encourages all of us to continue moving forward!

Chrisann Atuqtuaq Justice is a Barrow High School and Kiita Learning Community Iñupiaq teacher.

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