

## **ArctiChildren InNet (2012-2014) - Empowering School e-Health Model in the Barents region**

### A Memorable Russia Excursion

Excited, anticipatory and nervous - these might be the adjectives that perhaps best describe our emotions when we started our bus ride towards the eastern border of Finland. This was to be a health promotion trip to Kandalaksha, Murmansk and Lowozero in Russia, arranged by the ArcticChildren InNet project.

ArctiChildren InNet is a Kolarctic ENPI CBC funded project that aims to produce a health information site for young people. This site will be a health and wellness promotion channel between young people and health professionals as well as the schools and the homes. The main partners of the project are five pilot schools from Lapland. However, the project also cooperates internationally with schools outside Finland. The health information site has been launched at the beginning of the year 2013 in [arctichildren.fi](http://arctichildren.fi) and among the the first activities the public health nursing students of the Rovaniemi University of Applied Sciences have answered the health related questions sent in by young people from the pilot schools. One of the aims of this excursion was to initiate health promotion activities in the Russian partner schools of the project and involve the Russian pupils with the health promotion site.

The bus to Russia was full. There were more than 40 of us including teachers and students from Rovaniemi and Kemi-Tornio and from the University of Lapland. Naturally the ArctiChildren project staff was also there with us.

The excitement in the bus was almost tangible as we approached the Russian border. Everyone was double checking their passports and their mere existence every ten seconds. The Finnish custom officials let us through fairly quickly. The Russian border officials with their solemn faces and fur hats appeared more intimidating. We found ourselves straightening our backs and faces. We, the normally laid back individuals, seemed to freeze a bit to wait for the permission to enter the country. But, In due course, the border was crossed successfully.

The change in scenery revealed us that we had arrived in another country. The road was a bit more rugged than in our home country and the bus started to lose speed. We noticed that the buildings along the road looked a bit rickety and ruined in comparison with the Finnish houses we had just left behind. The villages and the cities not to mention the cars seemed exotic to us.

The first stop in Russia was in the town of Kandalaksha. The bus dropped off some teachers and students who had a reservation in the only hotel in town. Those of us who were to stay in Murmansk could just continue waiting for what was to come.

It was a long and winding road to Murmansk. Finally we arrived and we found our accommodation either in the hotel, hostel or the student dormitory. During the first night we didn't sleep much. It was mainly the hygiene standards that were a bit overwhelming for us. The men in the group desperately tried to calm the women down and it wasn't before long that we found ourselves having gained the courage to use the bathroom, the shower, and finally also the beds.

The next morning, after the breakfast, we headed to the Murmansk School no. 5. We were received by happy, smiling pupils who came to greet us at the main door. The school had arranged interpreter students to be there and help us communicate with the pupils. During the first day at the school we organized a theme day that dealt with health issues and health promotion in particular. The topics of the first day were nutrition, sleep, relaxation, friendship and physical activity. The pupils were divided into groups that worked and learnt around these themes.

The purpose of the nutrition group was to familiarize the pupils with the nutritional information in the food pyramid. We noticed very soon that the pupils had not done the pre-assignments that we had sent over earlier. Therefore, we had to explain everything about nutrients to them in detail. We divided the group into smaller teams. The teams were given a paper plate and pictures of different foods. The task was to design a nutritionally healthy food plate. It was a success and all the groups were totally focused on the plate composition. The groups had 30 minutes to finish the task and they could ask as many questions as they wanted from us – which they also did. There were some differences in the level of the English language skills between the groups and yet the

fact that the interpreters were not available the whole day it didn't affect the working and enthusiasm of the groups nor the learning outcome as far as we could see. The first theme day was very rewarding and we were all in high spirits due to the good start.

The second theme day group dealt with the topics of sleep and relaxation. The purpose was to learn by doing. First, we taught the pupils how to do a head massage. We taught and demonstrated the technique of a head massage and the pupils got a chance to practice following the example we gave to them. We noticed that some pupils were more hesitant to touch their peers but then again there were those pupils who seemingly enjoyed the massage and also massaging their friends. The massage was followed by a sleep assignment which included a matching task of the stages of sleep and what happens during them. This is where the interpreters really came in handy, if not invaluable. Some pupils in this group didn't understand English at all. We had had the material translated into Russian though which did help the persons who didn't speak any English. The assignment turned out a bit challenging. We got some feedback that it had been partly too difficult. The last five minutes of the sleep session were spent listening to some music and relaxing by lying on the floor. Before the pupils left the classroom we gave them cards that contained tips for a good night sleep.

During the following two days we organized workshops. Our topic again was nutrition and we continued from where we left earlier. This time it was possible to get into the matter deeper than before and we also got to know the pupils better. To provide the students with a more thorough understanding of nutrition, we used the food pyramid model and some tangible examples to demonstrate what nutrients the different food items contain. A can of Pepsi, a chocolate bar, a package of butter and a bag of sugar were among the items we studied with the pupils. A lot of questions were asked. Especially our eating habits and exercise were topics that we had to answer questions about. It was interesting and fun to answer the questions and to notice that the pupils really appreciated the information they got. It was also nice to see how well the different teams worked together. We checked the tasks and gave feedback to the teams. Finally, we conducted a quiz and rewarded the pupils with muesli bars.

All in all we were very happy and content about how warm and welcoming the pupils had been to us and how interested they had been in our lessons and workshops. We really hope that the information we were able to convey would be useful for the pupils in their future lives and that the knowledge they got would foster their wellbeing. Before we left the pupils wanted to take photos with us. At the end of the day we were taken for a city tour by the interpreters. We were humbled by the hospitality that our Russian hosts showed us. It is not often in Finland that you can experience that. In this area we really have a lot to learn from our Russian neighbors.

The trip to Russia lasted for five days. During that time we got used to sharing our rooms and working together. After the school days we walked and dined together downtown. It was truly a great chance to learn something about the Russian culture. During the return trip the atmosphere in the bus was a bit gloomy and perhaps we were sad to leave everything behind, or perhaps we were just anticipating to face the boring everyday routines in Finland again. We experienced something together in Russia, something we could not have experienced anywhere else in the world. What a great experience! Yes, we made it!

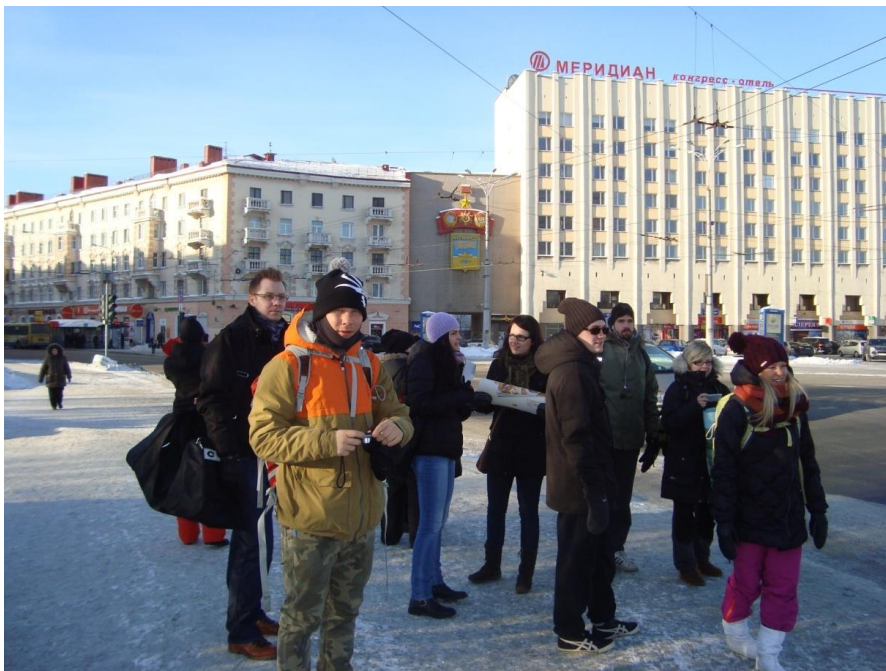
We think the ArctiChildren InNet site should continue cooperating with the Russian schools and to promote the health themes in Russian also. The young people where we went were really interested in health issues and we think they would be visiting the site. It seemed they would also be potential active users of the online health chat. The Russian version of the website could include more quizzes and games that interest the young people and through which they could learn about health and health promotion. The site could also contain information packages and a discussion forum for questions – similar to the Finnish version of the site. This site could also foster communication between Finnish and Russian young people. We believe that the site as such is beneficial in promoting health of the young people both in Finland and elsewhere.

Written by public health nursing students

Anne and Maiju, Rovaniemi University of Applied Sciences



The first morning briefing before setting off for the Murmansk school no.5.



Wondering where to go in the Murmansk city centre...



Practicing head massage.



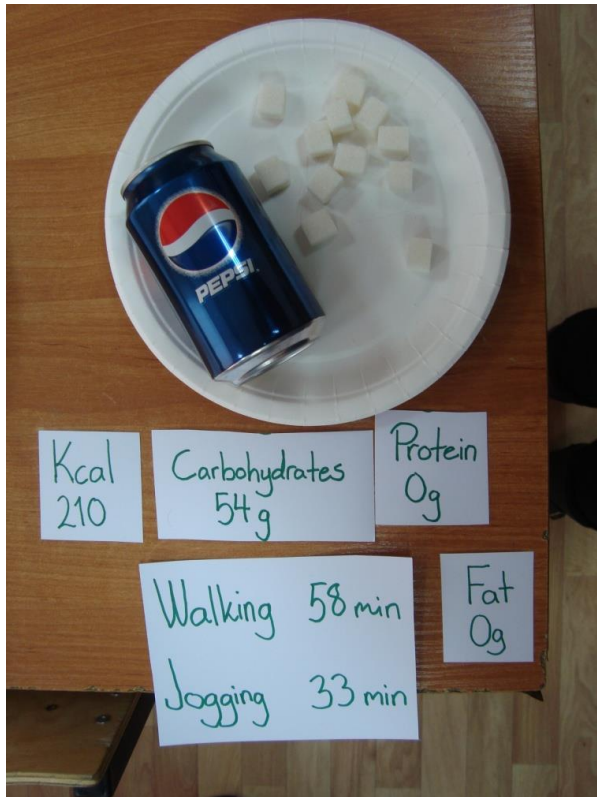
Pupils working on the sleep assignment.



Puzzled faces at the sleep assignment.



Relaxation exercise.



The food items task.





Nutrition group: Martina, Anne and Maiju with the interpreter student Ksenia