Research Summary: Bougie et al 2003

Title: Early Heritage-language Education and the Abrupt Shift to a Dominant-language Classroom: Impact on the Personal and Collective Esteem of Inuit Children in Arctic Quebec

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Main questions:

- What are the impacts on the personal and collective self-esteem of Inuit children in Nunavik when they experience a sudden shift, in grade 3, from Inuktitut-only to English-only education?
- Will early Inuktitut education help Inuit children overcome the negative impacts they experience from being submerged in a dominant English, second-language environment?

Background:

- Many First Nations children do not do well in school. They suffer low self-esteem in schools that mainly teach in English and focus on white culture.
- First Nations children do better if the school uses their heritage language more. This helps children appreciate their language and culture; it raises their self-esteem and they feel more secure in their ethnic identity.
- Inuit children need to learn and use their language, and value their culture to help it survive.
- Education programs for Inuit children sooner or later shift from Inuktitut to English; the main problem is not the shift itself, but how quickly it happens.

Main comments and conclusions:

- ✓ If Inuit children get early education in Inuktitut, they develop better, more complete, more complex Inuktitut language skills. They also develop better English language skills.
- ✓ Inuit children that get their early education in Inuktitut from an Inuit teacher develop a more positive view of themselves. Children have better cultural identity when the school uses, encourages, and gives status to their language.
- ✓ Children that get Inuktitut-only education up to grade 2 and suddenly shift to English-only education in grade 3 show a major decrease in personal self-esteem.
- ✓ Inuit children need a more gradual introduction to English, to protect their personal sense of self-worth. For example, schools need to foster Inuktitut and promote the Inuit culture; at the same time they teach English language structure, rules, and vocabulary. Schools need to keep using Inuktitut for some of the curriculum.
- ✓ Early education in Inuktitut does not necessarily prevent Inuit children from having negative views of their culture. It does not fully protect them from negative impacts of being submerged in a dominant, English environment.
- ✓ Children that have low self-esteem in middle childhood and don't do well in school can decide that school is not important. They adopt this view to help restore their sense of self worth.
- ✓ School and government policies need to uphold the vision and goals, to embrace and preserve language and culture. People need to develop policies that help to maintain Inuit children's positive sense of personal and collective self.
- ✓ Educators and policy makers need to deal with other challenges, such as training Inuit teachers and developing Inuktitut curriculum.