Research Summary: Louis & Taylor 2001

Title: **When the Survival of a Language is at Stake**
The Future of Inuttitut in Arctic Quebec

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Main questions:

- As Inuit children move from Inuttitut language education to dominant English or French second language education, to what extent do they progress in their second language?
- To what extent do Inuit children continue to progress in Inuttitut after switching to English or French-language education?
- Do children develop any skills in the third language and, if so, to what extent?
- What is the relationship between progress in Inuttitut and second / dominant language instruction? Does second / dominant language instruction subtract from or add to Inuttitut language skills?
- How well do conversational and academic language skills progress in the second / dominant language? In Inuttitut?
- Do Inuit children that learn in the English stream develop different skills than children that learn in the French stream?

Some background ideas:

- Language is a powerful social tool that defines status and controls access to resources. There is a dynamic relationship between social power and language.
- For Inuit, the survival of Inuktitut is at risk.

- A social-psychological approach to language learning looks at how indigenous people retain and lose their languages. In the past, mainstream educational institutions insisted children speak only English and most lost their indigenous language. Almost all North American indigenous languages have been extinguished and replaced by English.
- Inuktitut is one of three indigenous languages in Canada with potential for long-term survival. 90% of Inuit in Nunavik speak Inuttitut as their first language. In Nunavik 40% of Inuit school children and 72% of adults speak Inuttitut fluently.
- Nunavik schools teach children in Inuttitut, their first language, for grades one to three. Starting in grade four children receive three one-hour Inuttitut classes per week. They choose the English or French second language stream for all other classes.
- Formal education in the dominant language raises serious concerns about if and how indigenous languages will survive.
- Most indigenous people want their children to learn the dominant language so they can interact with and function well within the dominant culture.
- Young children commonly use Inuttitut with family members in the home and with friends in the schoolyard. English becomes attractive because it connects people with things such as sports broadcasting, TV movies, and pop music.

Main comments and conclusions:

- When Inuit children start their second / dominant language instruction in grade four, children in the English stream know a lot more English than children in the French stream know French.
- All Inuit children have higher conversational skills than academic skills when they start second / dominant language instruction, especially children in the English stream. By grade five English and French streams make progress in conversational skills and are catching up with academic skills.

- From grades three to four English and French streams also progress significantly in Inuttitut skills. By grade five academic Inuttitut skills start to decrease, although they are still better than second / dominant language academic skills.
- English is more common than French in the general community. This gives French stream children an advantage in learning a third language. English stream children develop no French conversational or academic skills. French stream children show good progress with English conversational skills and much less progress with English academic skills.
- In general, children made steady progress in English or French and maintained high levels of Inuttitut. The grade five decrease in Inuktitut academic skills may show a trend for the higher grades, as children receive fewer hours of Inuktitut education.
- Research shows a direct, cause and effect relationship between good indigenous language skills and good progress with second / dominant language skills. It's much more important that children have a good basis of indigenous language skills than they be exposed to the dominant / second language(s) in the community.
- Good Inuttitut skills to start and ongoing progress in Inuttitut academic skills contribute to progress with second / dominant language academic skills in grade four. Ongoing progress in Inuttitut is connected with stronger second / dominant language academic skills.
- Good Inuttitut skills are the basis for a positive transition at the end of grade three from Inuttitut instruction to second / dominant language instruction.
- If we maintain and develop indigenous language skills, we help prevent subtractive bilingualism. Subtractive bilingualism happens when people lose their first language skills as they learn a second language.

- Inuit children who start English or French language education at an early age – before grade three – have trouble and progress poorly both with Inuttitut and with second language English / French skills.
- Schools need Inuttitut teachers and Inuttitut curriculum materials that reflect Inuit culture.
- The research found large differences between French and English streams. For example, French stream children develop good conversational skills in English, the third language. English stream children develop no French skills.
- We need to further examine some questions central to the issue of Inuttitut survival. Do Inuttitut academic skills continue to decline in higher grades? What is the relationship between this decline and ongoing second / dominant language learning?