



# Table of Contents

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Welcome .....	v
Chapter 1 — Worldviews and Aboriginal Cultures: Where hearts are rooted.....	1
Chapter 2 — Aboriginal Students: Who are they? How do they learn?.....	29
Chapter 3 — The Classroom: A community of learners.....	41
Chapter 4 — School, Family and Community: Sharing the responsibility .....	61
Chapter 5 — Learning Strategies for Aboriginal Students: Opportunities to make learning meaningful.....	79
Chapter 6 — Assessment: Authentic reflections of important learnings .....	111
Chapter 7 — Teaching Aboriginal Students with Learning Disabilities: Recognizing gifts and strengths.....	123
Glossary of Terms .....	151
Appendices .....	157
1. Treaty Area Map of Alberta .....	158
2. First Nations and First Nations Communities in Alberta.....	159
3. Métis Settlements and Regional Zones in Alberta .....	161
4. First Nations and Métis Language Groups in Alberta .....	162
5. Guidelines for Talking Circles .....	163
6. Evaluating Resources About Aboriginal Peoples .....	164
7. Aboriginal Parents Offer Advice to Other Parents .....	167
8. Aboriginal Organizations and Agencies .....	168

## Table of Contents

9.	Fishbone .....	171
10.	T-chart .....	172
11.	Venn Diagram .....	173
12.	P-M-I Chart.....	174
13.	Place Mat.....	175
14.	K-W-L Chart.....	176
15.	Brainstorm .....	177
16.	Three-step Interview .....	178
17.	Independent Study Planner .....	179
18.	Choosing a Service Learning Project.....	180
19.	Making It Happen.....	181
20.	Reflecting on Our Service Learning .....	182
21.	Rubric Template.....	183
22.	Parents' Rights and Opportunities to Participate in Educational Decision Making.....	184
23.	Transition Checklist.....	185
24.	Decision-making Tree .....	186
25.	Influences on Decision Making.....	187
	Bibliography.....	189
	Index.....	195
	Feedback Form .....	215
	Order Form	



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– Tracey Poitras-Collins, Project Manager of *Our Words, Our Ways*  
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# Welcome

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This resource will help classroom teachers and staff better serve the needs of their Aboriginal students. The process of development was one of consultation, information gathering, drafting, more consultation and re-drafting. The contributors to this resource include Aboriginal Elders, teachers and psychologists as well as other members of Alberta's Aboriginal communities.

Culturally-relevant approaches effectively serve the learning needs of Aboriginal students. The term Aboriginal refers to the descendants of the original inhabitants of North America. The Canadian Constitution recognizes three groups of Aboriginal peoples: First Nations, Métis and Inuit. Traditional and contemporary Aboriginal cultures offer a number of frameworks for understanding, guiding, learning from and teaching students.

The relationship between student and teacher is the heart of Aboriginal education. The teacher's relationship with each student is based on observing and learning about the individual child and his or her unique learning needs in order to help the child grow holistically—spiritually, physically, mentally and emotionally. Education is very important to Aboriginal people—it is a key to the future for Aboriginal children and their families.

This resource offers information about Aboriginal cultures and perspectives, practical ideas, and sample strategies that will help teachers meet the needs and recognize the gifts of Aboriginal students. Many of the sample strategies are good for all students and are relevant for a range of educational settings and contexts.

## Guiding Principles

- Teacher understanding of and respect for the diversities of Aboriginal cultures, languages, histories and worldviews is integral to the success of Aboriginal students.
- Creating a classroom atmosphere that reflects and respects Aboriginal perspectives will benefit all the students in the classroom.
- Teacher/student relationship is the foundation of that student's success in the classroom.

- Teacher recognition and continued assessment of the learning strengths and needs of each Aboriginal student is vital to that student's progress.
- Positive, collaborative relationships with the families and communities of Aboriginal students will support student success.

### Defining family

Extended families and guardian relationships are a well-established part of Aboriginal community life. The term “parent” in this resource refers to the person taking the role of involved adult in a student's life. This person could be a grandparent, aunt, uncle, older sibling, cousin or other family member. Adoption is also common in Aboriginal communities—often in a social rather than legal sense—where an individual is “adopted” or “taken in” by a family, clan or community.

## How this Resource is Organized

The resource is organized into seven chapters. Each chapter contains information, sample strategies, shared wisdom from Aboriginal scholars and Elders, and related stories shared by Aboriginal teachers and liaisons.

### Worldviews and Aboriginal Cultures: Where hearts are rooted

Worldviews permeate all aspects of effective education of Aboriginal students. Worldviews are like stones thrown into the water from which other circles grow. Learning about the traditional and contemporary experiences unique to each Aboriginal student helps to develop effective approaches for supporting that student in the classroom. An understanding of Aboriginal history can help teachers contribute to the process of rebuilding healthy Aboriginal communities in which education is built on an acceptance and respect for Aboriginal languages, cultures and worldviews.

### Aboriginal Students: Who are they? How do they learn?

All Aboriginal students are unique individuals with their own set of gifts and needs, as well as members of a family and a cultural community. A teacher's best source of information about a student's gifts and needs grows out of a collaborative relationship with the student. By observing, experiencing and reflecting in partnership with the student, a teacher can learn how to most effectively support the student's success in the classroom.

## The Classroom: A community of learners

Aboriginal student learning is enhanced by a safe, comfortable classroom environment—a community of learners. Aboriginal students do their best work when they experience:

- a sense of belonging as respected and valued students
- the spirit of mastery that comes through encouragement of their gifts and competencies
- independence developed by opportunities to develop inner control and responsibility
- the spirit of generosity that reflects core values of sharing and community responsibility (Brendtro, Brokenleg and Van Bockern 1990).

## School, Family and Community: Sharing the responsibility

Parents play a vital part in an Aboriginal student's education, providing support, insight and direction. Welcoming the family, Elders, traditional teachers and others to the school and classroom strengthens Aboriginal students' experiences of cultural continuity as the core of the learning process.

## Learning Strategies for Aboriginal Students: Opportunities to make learning meaningful

Learning strategies, tailored to reflect cultural continuity, support Aboriginal students' success in the classroom.

## Assessment: Authentic reflections of important learnings

Culturally-aware classroom assessment and grading practices provide Aboriginal students with appropriate opportunities to demonstrate their learning.

## Teaching Aboriginal Students with Learning Disabilities: Recognizing gifts and strengths

Traditional Aboriginal worldviews recognize that each person brings a unique set of gifts to the community. Rather than regarding a student's learning challenges as disabilities, traditional approaches encourage the student and those who guide him or her to value both learning strengths and challenges.

