



# Worldviews and Aboriginal Cultures: Where hearts are rooted

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This chapter will help teachers to:

- gain an increased appreciation of the histories and cultural diversity of Aboriginal students
- gain a better understanding of the unique worldviews of Aboriginal students
- recognize the importance of reflecting the worldviews, strengths and gifts of Aboriginal cultures in the classroom through a consistent emphasis on cultural continuity
- recognize patterns of cultural differences
- begin to take steps to learn and teach about Aboriginal peoples.

Aboriginal students, regardless of whether they are gifted, bright, average or struggling, come to the classroom with histories and worldviews that are unique. Because these are such an integral part of who they are, it may be difficult for parents and students to articulate exactly what their histories and worldviews are, and exactly how these factors affect what they think and do. Some students in urban centres may have limited contact and understanding of their Aboriginal culture.

Even students who are assimilated into the mainstream culture, or who do not strongly identify with their Aboriginal ancestry, may face racism or be confronted with stereotypes. In order to avoid racism and stereotyping, some Aboriginal children make a concerted effort to hide their Aboriginal identity, claiming to be French, Italian—anything but Aboriginal.

While Aboriginal students benefit from best teaching practices, teachers support their students' learning needs most effectively when they incorporate into their teaching practice an understanding of the two key concepts in this chapter: Aboriginal histories and Aboriginal worldviews.

Understanding the history and the cultures of the Aboriginal peoples in the local community creates a better understanding of Aboriginal students. Becoming more familiar with Aboriginal worldviews helps teachers build cultural continuity into both the content and instructional approaches of all subject areas. Part of effectively learning about other cultures is developing a deeper understanding of your own culture. Becoming more aware of how cultural beliefs and practices affect teaching practices will help individual teachers make better and more culturally responsive choices throughout the teaching day.

### Strategies for Understanding History

The first—and most important—step towards understanding Aboriginal history is to recognize that Aboriginal people are strong people. In spite of the severity of the many issues that individuals, families and communities face, Aboriginal people are demonstrating their resiliency.

The shared history between Aboriginal peoples and European settlers is one of cultural disruption. Generations of Aboriginal peoples experienced profound, unsought and irreversible changes in their cultural and family life as a result. Many Aboriginal people are working to change the cycles of abuse, the social and economic disruption, the loss of languages and the assimilation of their cultures.

Education is a key to this change. Aboriginal people are building bridges and working to create educational communities where their children are respected and their cultures are reflected. They are rebuilding their Aboriginal cultures and hope to right the relations of the past.

### Key Historical Events for Aboriginal People of Alberta

There are a number of key events in the last two hundred years that affect Aboriginal people today.

#### *The Indian Act*<sup>1</sup>

In 1876, the government of Canada consolidated the *Gradual Civilization Act* and the *Indian Enfranchisement Act* into a single, comprehensive piece of legislation. The *Indian Act*, though amended over the years in important ways, remains a central fact of life for First Nations people in Canada.

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1. Reproduced with permission from Kainai Board of Education et al., *Peoples and Cultural Change: Aboriginal Studies 20* (Edmonton, AB: Duval House Publishing Inc., 2005), pp. 54–55.

The *Act* reinforced the powers of Canada's government over First Nations and extended those powers in significant ways. It regulated virtually every aspect of the lives of First Nations people in an effort to promote assimilation.

The *Indian Act* continued to disrupt traditional forms of government. It added new regulations about who qualified as members of a band, which determined who could vote in band elections. The *Indian Act* had a negative impact on the roles of women and Elders in traditional First Nations. Many traditional government practices held women and men as equal participants, and Elders as respected advisors and leaders. After the *Indian Act*, women and Elders were effectively removed from all official processes of government.

The government policy of assimilation led to the restriction of many activities that First Nations people practised in order to transmit their cultures. The *Indian Act's* most significant legacy was to rule and restrict the lives of First Nations people, even though its stated intent was to protect the rights and privileges of the first peoples of Canada.

### Residential schools

Under the *Indian Act*, education of First Nations and Inuit peoples became a federal responsibility that was met through the implementation of residential schools. Residential schools were established to assimilate First Nations and Inuit children into the dominant English-speaking, Christian culture. Many of the values and morals of this culture were in conflict with traditional Aboriginal values and customs.

Residential schools were put in place in the 1860s. In 1920, Canada amended the *Indian Act*, making it mandatory for First Nations and Inuit parents to send their children to Indian residential schools. The last residential school in Alberta closed in 1988. The last federally-operated residential school in Canada closed in Saskatchewan in 1996.

Five to six generations of First Nations and Inuit peoples were subjected to the residential school system. Children as young as four were removed from their families and taken to spend the majority of the year in institutions, often far away from their homes. Children were forbidden to speak their language and unable to follow their traditional customs. As a result, they often became ashamed of their language, culture and family. Some parents were forbidden to visit their children and did not see them for several years at a time.

Limited funds meant overcrowding and unhealthy living conditions, and children were exposed to diseases such as tuberculosis. Deputy Superintendent Duncan Campbell Scott estimated that overall “fifty percent of the children who passed through these schools did not live to benefit from the education which they had received therein” (1913, p. 615).

Despite the legislation and the pressures, many First Nations and Inuit people resisted the government’s efforts to assimilate their children. Some spoke out directly against the system. Many others simply refused to send their children to school, no matter what the consequences. Attendance remained low, in both residential and day schools. Only 3 percent of First Nations children remained in school beyond Grade 6.<sup>2</sup>

Liz Poitras, a Cree Elder, Sawridge First Nation, relates the following story about how some Aboriginal parents managed to keep their family together during this time. “In 1950 the Indian agent and priest came to my home to take me and my brothers and sisters to residential school. My father stood at the end of our driveway with his rifle and told them that if they came any closer he would shoot them. Needless to say, my brothers, sisters and I did not go to residential school and I am very thankful to my late dad, Albert Potskin, former Sawridge Band Councillor, for doing what he did.” Education was important to Liz’s family and she went on to get a graduate degree.

Although the federal government did not offer education specifically to Métis people, some Métis families, especially religious families, chose to send their children to residential schools.

While some Aboriginal people report that residential school was a positive experience, many felt a loss of cultural identity, the loss of opportunity to develop parenting skills and the impacts of trauma—all of which affected how they raised their children. The residential school experience has had an extensive impact on many communities.

Even the best-run residential schools and the most dedicated staff inflicted untold damage because of the flawed system. Entire generations of First Nations and Inuit people were essentially deprived of a normal family life. Parents lost the chance to raise their own children, and children lost the love and security of their homes, families and communities. Not only was traditional education of First Nations and Inuit children interfered with, the traditional family structure was broken.<sup>3</sup>

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2. Reproduced with permission from Kainai Board of Education et al., *Peoples and Cultural Change: Aboriginal Studies 20* (Edmonton, AB: Duval House Publishing Inc., 2005), p. 182.

3. *Ibid.*, pp. 182–183.

The hurt was cultural as well as personal. At residential schools, First Nations and Inuit children were taught that their cultures—their spiritual beliefs, their languages, even the clothes they wore—were inferior and wrong.<sup>3</sup>

A minority of residential school staff deliberately used their positions to abuse students emotionally, physically and sometimes even sexually. Because of their positions of power and the relative powerlessness of their victims, these abusers never expected to have to someday account for their crimes. The sexual abuse that took place in some schools damaged the self-identity of these children, which led to increased violence and suicide in First Nations and Inuit communities.<sup>3</sup>

Many residential school students received an inferior education. Because they spent only half of each day in the classroom, they did not have the same opportunities as other children. In the eyes of the system, First Nations and Inuit people were fit only for menial work. It was considered a waste to prepare them for anything more. Many children left the schools at age eighteen with the equivalent of only a Grade 5 education.<sup>3</sup>

### stories

#### Shared

“The survivors of the Indian residential school system have, in many cases, continued to have their lives shaped by the experiences in these schools. Persons who attended these schools continue to struggle with their identity after years of being taught to hate themselves and their culture. The residential school led to a disruption in the transference of parenting skills from one generation to the next. Without these skills, many survivors had difficulty in raising their own children. In residential schools, they learned that adults often exert power and control through abuse. The lessons learned in childhood are often repeated in adulthood with the result that many survivors of the residential school system often inflict abuse on their own children. These children in turn use the same tools on their children.”

Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples 1996b, p. 379

### Restrictive amendments to the *Indian Act*

In 1884, an amendment to the *Indian Act* instituted prison sentences for anyone participating in potlatch, tawanawa dance and other traditional ceremonies (Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples 1996a).

In 1895, further amendments prohibiting traditional dances and customs followed. Practices associated with traditional dances,

including the Blackfoot Sundance, and the Cree and Saulteaux thirst dance, were banned.

Following the *Indian Act*, the pass system was introduced. First Nations on the prairies were permitted to leave their reserves only if they had a written pass from a local Indian agent.

In 1924, amendments to the *Indian Act* made it illegal to gather to discuss political and economic issues, including land claims. It was also illegal to raise funds for land claims.

### Reserves<sup>4</sup>

One of the key provisions included in every numbered treaty was the creation of reserves. This provision alone had profound consequences for First Nations people. For example, the reserves secured land for First Nations, but could also be used as a way of confining First Nations people. Being confined to a reserve interfered with the traditional economic activities such as hunting and trapping, where it was not possible to remain settled in one small area of land.

Today many First Nations people in Alberta live on these reserves that were negotiated years ago.

Adapting to life on reserves was a major challenge for the First Nations people of the Plains. The idea of staying in one place to farm was contrary to traditional ways of life that involved moving seasonally to take advantage of resources in a wide region. People of the prairies were used to sharing as a community; individual farming did not conform to that practice. In addition, government-appointed Indian agents held all decision-making power on reserves.

First Nations groups were forced to learn a new way of life that was controlled by outsiders. Because the reserve system had broken up and isolated the various nations, there were few opportunities for group cooperation. The community was made less important than the individual, which was a denial of traditional First Nations culture.

### Women's status

From 1951 onward, Indian women who married men without Indian status lost their own Indian status, until the law was repealed in 1985 by Bill C-31. They, along with their children, lost Indian status, the right to live in the reserve community, and the right to treaty benefits or to inherit reserve land from family members (Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples 1996a).

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4. Reproduced with permission from Kainai Board of Education et al., *Peoples and Cultural Change: Aboriginal Studies 20* (Edmonton, AB: Duval House Publishing Inc., 2005), pp. 158, 161.

### Aboriginal war veterans

Aboriginal Canadians enlisted in proportionately higher numbers during World War II than did any other segment of the general population. First Nations people had to choose between maintaining treaty status under the *Indian Act* or status as veterans. Most Aboriginal veterans were excluded from the standard veterans' benefits that should have been their right, such as the right to purchase or lease land under the *Veterans' Land Act*, and a grant or loan to start farming or a small business. Aboriginal veterans, including Métis and non-status Indians, had great difficulty obtaining dependents' allowance and other veterans' benefits to which they were entitled (Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples 1996a).

### Right to vote

Registered First Nations people did not obtain the right to vote in federal elections until 1960, and the right to vote in Alberta provincial elections until 1965 (Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples 1996a).

### Children in care

In 1959, only one percent of children in care of Social Services were of Aboriginal ancestry. By the end of the 1960s, 30 to 40 percent of children in care were Aboriginal, even though they only constituted four percent of Canada's population. In what is called the "Sixties Scoop" (which continued into the 1980s), these children were fostered or adopted out to predominantly white families. Many times, culturally valued ways of raising children were misinterpreted by social workers and this resulted in apprehension of the children.

Often moved from home to home, children in foster care suffered great losses, including loss of birth names and tribal identity, cultural identity and, for First Nations children, loss of Indian status (Fournier and Crey 1997).

### Métis people

Métis are a distinct Aboriginal people with their own history, language and culture. The right to pursue a Métis way of life has been a long struggle. Throughout their history, Métis people endured repression, restrictions on trading, fraudulent schemes to dishonour Métis land entitlements, and marginalization of their culture and rights (Blackstock 2003).

In 1899, the Catholic missionary Father Albert Lacombe established an industrial residential school at St. Paul des Métis Settlement, in northeastern Alberta. In 1905, in response to the harsh discipline used to suppress Métis culture, traditions and values, students set the school on fire. It was never rebuilt.

In the late nineteenth century, pushed off their lands and unable to find work, many Métis people found themselves with nowhere to go. Looking for temporary shelter, they began to occupy small areas of land called road allowances. Road allowances were strips of land set aside by the Canadian government for future roads. They were usually on the edges of non-Aboriginal settlements or farms.<sup>5</sup>

Métis people would build shacks or log huts on these road allowances, with no guarantee that they would not be again displaced. They became known locally as the *road allowance people*.<sup>5</sup>

Despite the impermanence of the road allowance homes, some Métis people remember their lives there as living in strong community.<sup>5</sup>

The *Indian Act* often disregarded Métis heritage in its registration process. It was not until 1982 that Métis people were recognized in Section 35.2 of the Canadian Constitution, with “aboriginal peoples of Canada” defined as including the “Indian, Inuit and Métis peoples of Canada.” It took until 2003 for the Supreme Court of Canada to rule that Métis people in and around Sault Ste. Marie were entitled to the same hunting and fishing rights as other Aboriginal peoples (CTV News, September 20, 2003).

In 1990, the Alberta government enacted legislation granting land title to the people of the Métis settlements. The legislation awarded Métis people title to 500 000 hectares of settlement land and \$310 million payable over seventeen years. The money was for basic operations of the settlements and for economic development projects.<sup>6</sup>

The people of the Métis settlements finally have a voice in the administration of their lands and members of the settlements elect settlement councils.<sup>6</sup>

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5. Adapted with permission from Kainai Board of Education et al., *Peoples and Cultural Change: Aboriginal Studies 20* (Edmonton, AB: Duval House Publishing Inc., 2005), p. 106.

6. *Ibid.*, p. 127.

### wisdom

#### Shared

“To Métis people, the words *community* and *family* are almost interchangeable. Métis people view not only their relations as family, but friends, neighbours and workmates can all be a part of what a Métis person considers part of the family. In Métis culture, children are not solely the responsibility of their parents. The whole community traditionally shares in the task of raising the next generation. Elders, grandparents, aunts, uncles, trusted friends, leaders and other community members all have their vital role to play in shaping the future of our Nation.”

– Métis Family Services  
in Kainai Board of Education et al. 2005, p. 127

### For more information about Aboriginal history

Kainai Board of Education, Métis Nation of Alberta, Northland School Division, Tribal Chiefs Institute of Treaty Six, Duval House Publishing and Alberta Education worked in partnership to develop a series of three student resources to support the Aboriginal Studies 10–20–30 program of studies. These award-winning resources are the first of their kind in Alberta and are a valuable reference for building an understanding of Aboriginal histories, cultures and perspectives.

Copies of these resources may be available at local libraries or can be purchased from the Learning Resources Centre at [www.lrc.education.gov.ab.ca/](http://www.lrc.education.gov.ab.ca/) or at 780-427-2767.

To read more about:

- diverse cultural characteristics, origins, and migration and settlement patterns of Aboriginal peoples
  - political and economic organization of Aboriginal peoples
  - Aboriginal art forms, oral traditions and literature
- see *Aboriginal Perspectives: Aboriginal Studies 10* (2004) by the Kainai Board of Education et al.

To read more about:

- Métis roles in the settlement of Western Canada
  - effects of treaty relationships between First Nations peoples and the Government of Canada
  - effects of government policies, legislation and practices on Aboriginal education, cultures and peoples
- see *Peoples and Cultural Change: Aboriginal Studies 20* (2005) by the Kainai Board of Education et al.

To read more about:

- Aboriginal peoples' rights to self-government and self-determination
  - Aboriginal land rights, entitlements and current land claim negotiations
  - impact of colonialism experienced by Aboriginal peoples in Alberta
  - common issues faced by indigenous peoples around the world
- see *Contemporary Issues: Aboriginal Studies 30* (2005) by the Kainai Board of Education et al.

## Diversity of Aboriginal Peoples

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.

Talking about Aboriginal cultures is equivalent to talking about Asian, European or African cultures—each of these cultures includes a wide variety of nations, customs, traditions, languages and outlooks. It would be misleading to suggest that a list of common cultural traits could describe the richness and diversity of Aboriginal cultures. With 44 First Nations, 8 Métis Settlements and many urban Aboriginal communities, Alberta's Aboriginal cultures are very diverse.

### Culture as a framework<sup>7</sup>

**Culture** is the social framework for participating in and understanding the world. Every culture has key elements. The first is **worldview**—the way a group perceives and understands the world. The other four elements are the customs and routines that shape people's lives—an economy, a social structure, a form of government and a form of education. Generations transmit culture by immersing children in their particular version of these elements. Children learn their culture both formally (through deliberate teaching) and informally (through participating in the ways of their families and communities). As children grow up, they absorb the organization of life around them. They also absorb the way this organization changes. Sometimes it changes slowly, sometimes abruptly.

Abrupt change creates difficult transitions for cultures. During an abrupt change, key cultural elements can be lost between one generation and the next. Abrupt change can happen when crucial resources fail, when disease devastates families and communities. It can also happen when one culture overwhelms another, imposing new ideas and forms of education.

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7. Reproduced with permission from Kainai Board of Education et al., *Peoples and Cultural Change: Aboriginal Studies 20* (Edmonton, AB: Duval House Publishing Inc., 2005), pp. 4, 5.

In Canada, Aboriginal peoples faced all of these forms of abrupt change, yet their cultures remain intact in many respects. As change swept over them, Aboriginal peoples thought about the future and secured their place in it. They also work for **cultural continuity** today, so that their communities can continue to evolve in their own way.

### First Nations<sup>8</sup>

First Nations has more than one meaning. It often refers to a cultural group or nation of indigenous peoples, such as the Kainai, Cree, Anishinabé or Mi'kmaq. First Nations people were once known by the name *Indians*. However, *Indians* is considered offensive to many people today, partly because the name does not reflect the true position of First Nations as indigenous peoples of Canada. This resource uses names preferred by Aboriginal groups, unless quoting federal government legislation, where the term *Indian* is still common.

Canada's First Nations are diverse historically, culturally and linguistically. The term *First Nation* can also refer to the government of a group of First Nations people. There are over 630 First Nations governments today, each representing the interests of a distinct group of people.

### Inuit peoples<sup>8</sup>

Inuit peoples are from Arctic areas of North America, as well as other countries with polar regions. *Inuit* means “the people” in Inuktitut, the Inuit language. Inuit peoples also have diverse cultural traits that vary across the huge Arctic region. Six variants of Inuktitut are spoken in Canada.

Inuit people are also indigenous to Canada, although they are culturally different from First Nations. Many of the Inuit people living in Alberta have moved here from the Arctic to pursue education or employment opportunities.

### Métis people<sup>8</sup>

The term *métis* comes from a French word that refers to a person of mixed heritage. It first came into use in the sixteenth century, when the French began to visit North America regularly. Métis became a name used to describe the heritage of children born of French fur traders and First Nations women.

As the fur trade developed through the next 300 years, the name Métis gradually became more specific. Métis increasingly referred to a culturally distinct nation of people with First Nations-French ancestry.

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8. Reproduced with permission from Kainai Board of Education et al., *Aboriginal Perspectives: Aboriginal Studies 10* (Edmonton, AB: Duval House Publishing Inc., 2005), pp. 4–5, 7.

Many of these people lived in the Red River area of what is now Manitoba.

In the twentieth century, the term became broader, often including people with an English- or Scottish-First Nations heritage who were also from Red River. Today political organizations such as the Métis Nation of Alberta define the Métis Nation as a group of individuals who are associated with a recognized Métis family or community and who self-identify as Métis people.

### Linguistic groups<sup>8</sup>

Linguistic groups are sometimes useful in understanding cultural connections. A linguistic group is composed of nations who speak the same basic language, although different variations may exist. For example, the Cree linguistic group has five major variants across Canada. One Cree person speaking to another in a different variant could likely make himself or herself understood. However, a Cree person speaking to a Blackfoot speaker will not be understood, even though Cree and Blackfoot are part of the same language family. Blackfoot is its own linguistic group.

Individual communities within one linguistic group can also show many cultural differences from one another.

For more information, see *Appendix 1: Treaty Area Map of Alberta*, *Appendix 2: First Nations and First Nations Communities in Alberta*, *Appendix 3: Métis Settlements and Regional Zones in Alberta* and *Appendix 4: First Nations and Métis Language Groups in Alberta*.

### Common threads

Although common threads may run through the experiences of Aboriginal students, each student will bring a varying degree of involvement with aspects of traditional and contemporary Aboriginal cultures and mainstream cultures. Aboriginal students at post-secondary institutions in Alberta represent about 70 different Aboriginal cultures and societies. This cultural diversity among Aboriginal students is particularly evident in urban centres.

Aboriginal students:

- may identify themselves as First Nations, Métis or Inuit—or they may not identify themselves as Aboriginal at all
- may live a traditional, bicultural or assimilated lifestyle
- may have an urban, rural, reserve or settlement background
- may speak an Aboriginal language at home, or may hear and understand an Aboriginal language but not be able to speak it.

Learning about students' cultures helps teachers better support their success. It is important for teachers to take the time to listen to Aboriginal students and families, and learn about their unique histories and cultures.

### about Aboriginal people

#### Statistics

From 1996 to 2001, the Aboriginal population grew by more than 22 percent while the non-Aboriginal population increased by only 3.4 percent (CBC News in Review, 2003).

The median age of Aboriginal peoples is well below that of the non-Aboriginal population. In 2001, 50 percent of the First Nations population was less than 24.7 years (Statistics Canada, 2001 Census).

The number of Registered Indians in Alberta is projected to increase from 87,311 in 2000 to 128,103 by the year 2021 (Indian and Northern Affairs Canada, and Statistics Canada n.d.).

Twenty-five percent of the Aboriginal population lives in 10 urban centres—Winnipeg has the greatest number, followed by Edmonton, Vancouver and Calgary (Statistics Canada, 2001 Census).

For a *Glossary of Terms* related to Aboriginal history and diversity, see page 151.

## Worldviews and Education

Each Aboriginal group expresses its culture in various ways—a result of geographic circumstances and each group's unique history. At the same time, many Aboriginal peoples throughout North America share similar guiding thoughts and traditional values.

These common threads running through many Aboriginal cultures are sometimes referred to as foundational worldviews. They reflect the guiding principles and traditional values of Aboriginal societies. They suggest the way Aboriginal peoples see themselves in relation to the world.

Traditional Aboriginal education is based upon these worldviews—it is a holistic process where learning takes place across different spheres of human experience including spiritual, physical, emotional and mental dimensions. Worldviews may also consider relationships and experiences of the past, present and future as interconnected.

Spirituality, relationships and the expression of traditional values are the heart of Aboriginal education. Each sphere needs to be addressed in each subject area. Spiritual, physical, emotional and mental spheres should be considered within each learning activity. For example, a Grade 1 science unit on colour could move beyond simply identifying colours to exploring how colours have special significance in symbols, dress and natural objects. This is in contrast to Western education, where these dimensions tend to be addressed more in isolation—for example, the physical sphere is addressed in physical education and the spiritual sphere is addressed in religion or not at all.

In a contemporary setting, Aboriginal education is what happens when attitudes, approaches and actions allow Aboriginal students to become fully participating co-creators of society. Aboriginal education recognizes the significant and valuable contributions—past, present and future—of Aboriginal people to society.

### wisdom

Shared

#### **Traditional values**

“A holistic philosophy and psychology rooted in traditional Native values can improve the educational opportunities for Native children.”

– Joe Couture, Cree Elder

Effective education that includes Aboriginal worldviews does not exclude or discredit other cultures but ensures that non-Aboriginal students and Aboriginal students alike are given the opportunity to see Aboriginal perspectives, and the strengths and gifts of Aboriginal people reflected in the schools they attend.

There are five strong threads common to Aboriginal worldviews that can be brought to life in the classroom:

- a holistic perspective
- the interconnectedness of all living things
- connection to the land and community
- the dynamic nature of the world
- strength in “power with.”

### A holistic perspective

While Western education often focuses on verbal thinking and uses an analytical approach to learning, Aboriginal worldviews address the whole person, encompassing their mental, physical, emotional and spiritual capabilities in relation to all living things.

Aboriginal worldviews assume that all forms are interconnected, that the survival of each life form is dependent on the survival of all others. Aboriginal worldviews also note that the force that animates the life forms is derived from an unseen but knowable spiritual realm.

Aboriginal worldviews see a unified vision, rather than an artificial fragmentation of concepts. These worldviews assert that all life is sacred and that all life forms are connected. Humans are neither above nor below others in the circle of life. Everything that exists in the circle is one unity, one heart.

Western education often artificially separates learning into discrete subject areas. An Aboriginal perspective uses an integrated approach. For example, the making of a star quilt would be seen as an art involving geometry (including symmetry and rotations), an opportunity to meet a quilt maker from the community, and a way to learn cultural teachings regarding the star pattern and quilt. Quiltmaking is often a communal experience and this working with others to meet a common goal is an opportunity to explore and learn about the importance of establishing and maintaining relationships.

Consider the following strategies for fostering this perspective.

- Build learning activities around meaningful content that relates to students' experiences and engages them in tasks based on their learning interests.
- Allow opportunities for visual symbolic thinking and holistic approaches to education.
- Look for opportunities to make connections among subject areas, for example, social studies, literature and art.
- Explore the ways in which learning can happen as a result of flexible scheduling. For example, can scheduling changes on a field trip accommodate opportunities for holistic learning?
- When appropriate, ask a member of the Aboriginal community to assist with the learning and to provide an Aboriginal perspective. This will enhance the credibility of the learning activity, and build a connection between the school and the community.

## wisdom

### Shared

#### **Web of life**

“All things and all people, though we have our own individual gifts and special place, are dependent on and share in the growth and work of everything and everyone else. We believe that beings thrive when there is a web of interconnectedness between the individual and the community, and between the community and nature.

Everything we do, every decision we make, affects our family, our community, it affects the air we breathe, the animals, the plants, the water in some way. Each of us is totally dependent on everything else.”

– Evelyn Steinhauer

### The interconnectedness of all living things

Aboriginal worldviews recognize the interconnectedness of all living things and the spirit that exists within each. Spirituality, personal health, community health and the health of the environment are understood to be interrelated.

With the recognition of the connections among all things come the questions—What are an individual’s relations to other people? To nature? To the land?

All individuals assume a responsibility for themselves, not in isolation, but in relation to all else. Each individual is regarded as a participating, contributing member of the group. Cooperation and sharing are vital.

Consider the following strategies for fostering this perspective.

- Create a classroom community. Encourage each student to be a contributor.
- Encourage students to be aware of their sphere of influence and to always consider the impact of their actions on others and on the classroom community.

### Connection to the land and community

A sacred relationship with nature is the heart of traditional teachings and practices. From the understanding of the interconnectedness of all things comes the understanding that the well-being of the Earth is essential for survival.

Growing out of this connection to the Earth, Aboriginal worldviews encompass a fluid sense of time and the cyclical nature of change—day and night, the seasons, life and death.

Connection to the Earth also teaches about the importance of place and of the connection to a place of belonging. The Earth provides the land on which people build communities—land and community dictate a way of life.

Consider the following strategies for fostering this perspective.

- Explore ways to create a sense of home in the classroom and school for Aboriginal students and families. Think about how to draw people into the classroom and make them feel welcome.
- Recognize and celebrate the seasons and the changes that they bring. Use nature as a classroom. Mark occasions. This tends to be more challenging at the senior high school level where bigger, less personal surroundings and the pressures of curriculum content mean that rather than celebrating the seasons, for example, the year is marked by mid-terms and finals.
- Create opportunities for experiential learning. For example, when teaching students about traditional Aboriginal food such as blueberries, plan the learning activity so that the class can go out to the land and actually have the experience of picking berries.

### The dynamic nature of the world

Aboriginal cultures are dynamic, adaptive and adapting, not limited to the past.

In Aboriginal worldviews, everything—people, relationships, situations—is dynamic. Individuals change, and Aboriginal cultures evolve and adapt. Learning is recognized as a creative process from which new structures, forms and practices evolve.

Considering the following strategies for fostering this perspective.

- Encourage students to consider multiple perspectives. Focus less on opinion and argument or right and wrong, and encourage students to share and extend their own thinking through discussion with others.
- Explore the relationships between concepts. Encourage students to go beyond dichotomous “this OR that” thinking. Help them focus on multiple possibilities instead—“this AND that.”

- Be aware that Aboriginal languages tend to be more descriptive and more action-oriented than English. Aboriginal languages tend to describe concepts such as snow and wind by what and how they do something, whereas English simply tends to name the concept.

### Strength in “power with”

In Aboriginal cultures, worldviews reflect “power with,” rather than “power over.” The image for this concept is a circle, and all living things are viewed as equal within the circle. “Power with” is a dialogue, where everyone stands on the ground, face to face.

The image for “power over” is a pyramid, with those at the top holding the greatest power. “Power over” is a hierarchy, where the few stand above the many.

Consider the following strategies to reflect “power with” in the classroom.

- Learn from the students about how they learn best. Work in genuine collaboration with them to determine the approaches that are most effective.
- Involve students when making decisions about the classroom. Provide opportunities for developing their skills so that they become effective at making *real* decisions about things that matter. Work toward consensus.
- Invite older or stronger students to mentor younger or less able students. Find ways to reverse the process, e.g., find a skill that a younger student could mentor in an older student.
- Welcome and validate parent input into decision making about their child’s education. Treat them as full partners in the collaboration that is essential for supporting their child’s learning.
- Recognize that parents have expert knowledge about their Aboriginal community. Ask for their help and advice in choosing classroom visitors, and connecting with other community and cultural resources.

## Cultural Continuity

“Aboriginal people often say, ‘Our children are our future.’ By extension, then, the future depends on the effectiveness of education. Education shapes the pathways of thinking, transmits values as well as facts, teaches language and social skills, helps release creative potential and determines productive capacities” (Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples 1996a, p. 82).

In support of Aboriginal education, Alberta Learning published its comprehensive First Nations, Métis and Inuit report in 2002. Its goals include:

- high quality learning opportunities that are responsive, flexible, accessible and affordable to the learner
- excellence in learner achievement.

### wisdom

#### Shared

##### **Living culture**

“The objective of Aboriginal education is to develop knowledge, skills and values rooted in the centuries old tradition.

We must always remember that culture is something that does not keep still; it develops through challenges and interactions of people and events or it becomes distorted and dies. It is the continuity of living culture that is important ...”.

– Joe Couture, Cree Elder

Schools and teachers across the province are encouraged to provide culturally appropriate education for their Aboriginal students. Students report that their most positive learning experiences involve times when culture is reflected in the classroom or when there is a strong relationship of respect and encouragement with an educator.

Overall, Aboriginal people want two basic things from the education system. They want schools to help children, youth and adults learn the skills they need to participate fully in the economy. And they want schools to help children and youth develop as citizens of Aboriginal nations—with the knowledge of their histories, languages and traditions necessary for cultural continuity (Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples 1996a).

Regardless of their heritage, students learn best when they learn in context—when they can relate what they are learning to their own experience. In this sense, Aboriginal students are often at a disadvantage because many aspects of Aboriginal culture are not reflected in their classrooms.

To work effectively with Aboriginal students, teachers need to realize how vital cultural continuity is to student achievement.

What does cultural continuity mean?

It is the process of integrating culture into students' daily learning, a process that encourages students to learn from a position of wholeness, where they can see their reality and experiences reflected in what is being learned and how it is being taught.

Cultural continuity threads through both content and process in the classroom. It involves culture in its broadest and deepest sense—it includes the worldviews and traditional values of Aboriginal peoples. These are expressed in history, religion, laws, the arts, patterns of communication, decision making, and relationships among individuals and groups—and all other aspects of human interaction and endeavour.

### wisdom

#### Shared

##### **Recapturing our wholeness**

“... if we go back to the origin of the word heal ... it is structurally related to the word whole, which is in itself related to the word holy. And this is something I understand we are all trying to do together. The healing process is a way of recapturing our wholeness.

... I would suggest, not only to Native people, but to many people both in Canada and the United States, there has been a history of people being told to amputate a part of themselves to be able to fit something that's rigid and not built for them in the first place. Amputate ... your language, your spirituality, whatever, as Bateson would say, is a difference that makes a difference ... Part of what we are going to do now is a healing process in the sense of reclaiming wholeness.

... what we are doing here is a sacred thing, and I cannot emphasize that enough. It is not about academic credits, and it is not about certifications. It is a sacred work to reclaim wholeness.”

– Tafoya 1995, p. 27

## Learning About Cultural Differences

Becoming more familiar with students' cultural backgrounds will help teachers:

- understand how cultural differences may affect students' learning
- understand students' motivations and values
- adapt materials and approaches appropriately
- build mutual respect.

## wisdom

Shared

### Cultural awareness

“Only after we become aware of the [cultural] differences and understand them well enough to accept them as equally valid and good are we prepared to teach these students. Then neither the teacher nor the child will be pressured to adopt the other’s culture, and mutual respect and understanding can develop.”

– Gilliland 1999, p. 5

An effective way of learning about students’ Aboriginal cultures is for teachers to become aware of their own perspectives, for example, to reflect on what they know about Aboriginal cultures and how they have learned what they know.

## wisdom

Shared

### Cultural perspectives

“Our perceptions of the ways others think and act depend on our cultural perspective, which depends, in part, on our understanding that cultural differences *do* exist among groups. Equally important is the ability to recognize the vast diversity *within* cultural groups. Without such a recognition, we run the risk of stereotyping people.”

– Chamberlain 2005, p. 197

Not understanding cross-cultural differences can hamper teachers’ effectiveness. The following six fundamental patterns of cultural differences—ways in which cultures tend to vary from one another—are a framework that teachers can use to build their own understanding and appreciation of cross-cultural differences. This framework includes communication styles, attitudes towards conflict, approaches to completing tasks, decision-making styles, attitudes towards openness in personal matters and different approaches to knowing.

### Communication styles

Consider language use (for example, how many meanings does the word “yes” have, depending on how you say it) and nonverbal communication.

Within different Aboriginal communities, individuals may verbally or nonverbally acknowledge what is said, for example, by nodding or saying “yes” or “ummhmm.” This may simply be recognition of a person’s right to speak and to share ideas or opinions. It does not necessarily signal agreement with the idea or opinion.

### Attitudes towards conflict

In some cultures, conflict is seen as a positive opportunity to work out differences, while in others it is something to be avoided because it is demeaning or embarrassing.

Survival in small traditional Aboriginal communities depended, in part, on the ability of their members to work together. In many Aboriginal cultures, direct confrontation was avoided in order to maintain cooperative relations. Instead, a more indirect approach was often taken, for example, by telling an individual a story with a lesson.

Similarly, students and families in the school may not be comfortable with conflict or addressing issues that will focus attention on them. Teachers report that their Aboriginal students may avoid conflict by quietly leaving the school or the community for a time.

### Approaches to completing tasks

Approaches to tasks vary from culture to culture. In some cultures, people get to know each other through the work rather than taking time to establish relationships before the work begins. Different concepts of time may affect task completion.

In Aboriginal communities, individuals tend to take the time to greet each other and establish a relationship before they begin to work. This time of establishing a relationship is considered a necessary part of addressing the task. Different communities have different protocols for introductions and approaching others, gathering information, and working with others. It is important to ask about and follow the established protocol for the community.

Traditional Aboriginal education emphasizes contextual and meaningful learning. Thus, educational activities need to be relevant to the daily activities of the students. If they do not see a clear and immediate connection to their world, then it is likely that other activities will take precedence over schoolwork.

By taking the time to establish a strong relationship with students, teachers increase the likelihood students will give higher priority to the tasks teachers assign.

### Decision-making styles

In some cultures, decisions are made by a leader; in others, they are made by delegation or by consensus.

In many Aboriginal families, decisions are made collaboratively rather than by one individual. This allows everyone who is affected by the decision to have opportunity for input. Rather than making decisions on the spot, time is often taken for reflection.

Women play an important role in making key decisions. In many traditional Aboriginal societies, women were engaged in prominent leadership roles. They participated actively in political and cultural life, either publicly or behind the scenes. They had considerable influence on family affairs, especially as they grew older and were seen as women of wisdom. Although colonialism disrupted cultural practices and introduced discrimination against women, Aboriginal women are once again becoming an increasingly strong voice on both the political and home fronts.

When making decisions or solving problems, Aboriginal parents and students may consult with supportive family or community members.

Reflecting this collaborative approach, decisions about student learning should be made using a consensus model, with parents and students as key partners in the process.

### Attitudes towards openness in personal matters

In some cultural groups, it is appropriate to be open about emotions, about reasons behind a conflict and about personal information, as a way of building trust. In other cultures, trust must be developed before personal information can be shared. People's degree of openness in personal matters will vary from community to community and from individual to individual.

Developing a relationship built on trust and acceptance is paramount when working with Aboriginal students and families. Knowing and respecting the situations faced by many Aboriginal students and families will go a long way in developing this trust. When trust is established, students and their families will relate in a more meaningful and personal way with teachers and other school personnel.

### Different approaches to knowing

Cultural groups may differ in the way in which information is gathered, for example, through objective means, through imagery or through inner knowing.

Mainstream education systems tend to validate knowledge gained through objective means, such as quantitative research or tested hypotheses. Credentials and “book knowledge” tend to be placed in high regard.

In traditional Aboriginal education systems, learning is seen as an individual’s lifelong responsibility. Traditional teachings stress personal responsibility and relationships. Teachers model competent and respectful behaviour. A specific product or grade is not as important as the process of learning and living.<sup>9</sup>

### wisdom

#### Shared

“We had ... our own teachings, our own education system – teaching children that way of life was taught [by] the grandparents and extended families; they were taught how to view and respect the land and everything in Creation.

Through that, the young people were [educated about] what were the Creator’s laws, what were these natural laws. What were these First Nations’ laws. And talk revolved around a way of life, based on their values. For example: ... to share, to care, to be respectful of people, how to help oneself. How to help others. How to work together ...”

– Peter Waskahat, Cree Elder, Frog Lake First Nation  
in Cardinal and Hildebrandt 2000, pp. 15–16

The holistic nature of traditional education shapes the teaching styles and methods. This educational philosophy nurtures learners, showing them how to achieve their individual goals while at the same time meeting the collective needs of the community. Education passes on the values central to Aboriginal communities and families.<sup>9</sup>

Traditional Aboriginal education prepares students for total living. It focuses on a multidimensional approach balanced to meet the emotional, mental, physical and spiritual needs of the learner.<sup>9</sup>

Teachers concentrate on what learners can do rather than what they cannot. This reinforces each learner’s unique abilities. Traditional teaching strategies involve:

- strong visual components or tools
- learning in real life, rather than by practice in artificial settings
- a focus on people and relationships rather than on information.<sup>9</sup>

9. Reproduced with permission from Kainai Board of Education et al., *Peoples and Cultural Change: Aboriginal Studies 20* (Edmonton, AB: Duval House Publishing Inc., 2005), p. 173.

In Aboriginal cultures, knowledge is often embedded within the language of the community. Information tends to be framed around relationships such as the interconnectedness of humans, animals, plants, the environment and the Creator. Information is gathered and shared holistically. The oral tradition is used to ensure knowledge is shared from generation to generation.

### stories

#### Shared

“Traditionally, Aboriginal cultural knowledge is transmitted and documented primarily through the oral tradition, but also through such things as dramatic productions, dance performances, and they are documented on such artifacts as wampum belts, birch bark scrolls, totem poles, petroglyphs and masks. This is the Aboriginal way of transmitting knowledge and of recording information and history.”

– Greg Young-Ing  
in Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples 1996c, p. 591

At the core of traditional education lies Aboriginal spirituality and traditional knowledge. Elders play a vital role passing on traditional knowledge to students. Holistic teachings and counselling from Elders brings continuity to students’ lives—they learn from Elders both in and out of school. By conducting and providing instruction in ceremonies such as Sweat Lodges and pipe ceremonies, Elders teach learners to honour what is sacred in the universe as well as what is sacred in themselves. These ceremonies are powerful tools that can show learners that they are integral, respected members of their community.<sup>10</sup> Adhering to ceremonial protocols can also help individuals build self-discipline, and strengthen their relationships with others and with the physical and spiritual world around them.

Like all peoples, Aboriginal peoples rely on education to continue their culture. Using extensive parental and community participation, Aboriginal educators work toward developing qualities and values in their students that include respect for Elders, cultural tradition, leadership, generosity, integrity, wisdom, compassion for others and living in harmony with the environment.<sup>10</sup>

10. Reproduced with permission from Kainai Board of Education et al., *Peoples and Cultural Change: Aboriginal Studies 20* (Edmonton, AB: Duval House Publishing Inc., 2005), p. 173.

## Getting Started: Learning and Teaching About Aboriginal Cultures

The more teachers know about the histories, languages and cultures of Aboriginal peoples, the more comfortable they are using the range of resources and materials available to help them. Consider the following strategies for learning and teaching about Aboriginal cultures.

### Start with students

Students may have a wealth of information. Approach them discreetly, as many Aboriginal students do not want to be singled out as being different in front of their classmates. Ask them what they know about language and culture. Ask them who they know in the community. They may be able to suggest people that teachers can talk with or invite into the class.

### Get to know parents

Encourage parents to visit the classroom. Follow-up on invitations to visit with them at home or in the community, for example, at a round dance or pow-wow. Ask them for suggestions about classroom visitors and for introductions to individuals and organizations in the community.

### Contact appropriate organizations

Find out if the school jurisdiction or a neighbouring jurisdiction has Aboriginal consultants or liaison workers, and get to know them. Most post-secondary institutions in Alberta have liaison workers who are aware of community events and resources for Aboriginal people. Friendship Centres can put teachers in touch with individuals who can visit classrooms and they are also a good source for information about community events and resources.

### Look for resources

Teachers can use print resources, Web sites, videos and other sources of information to increase their own cultural awareness and to build cultural continuity in the curriculum they teach. Parents and other community members can provide excellent feedback regarding the appropriateness and cultural validity of resources for use in the classroom.

### Learn about contemporary issues in the Aboriginal community

Follow the stories in the mainstream media but dig deeper. Read an Aboriginal newspaper. Visit the Web site of an Aboriginal organization.

### Be willing to invest time

Realize that it will take time to learn about the community and to build relationships. When people recognize that a teacher is sincere, open and respectful, most people will value that teacher's interest and effort.

### Participate in professional development opportunities

Look for opportunities for ongoing multidimensional professional development that will help build an understanding of contemporary issues that affect First Nations, Métis and Inuit learners and explore thinking strategies that will best meet the needs of these students.

