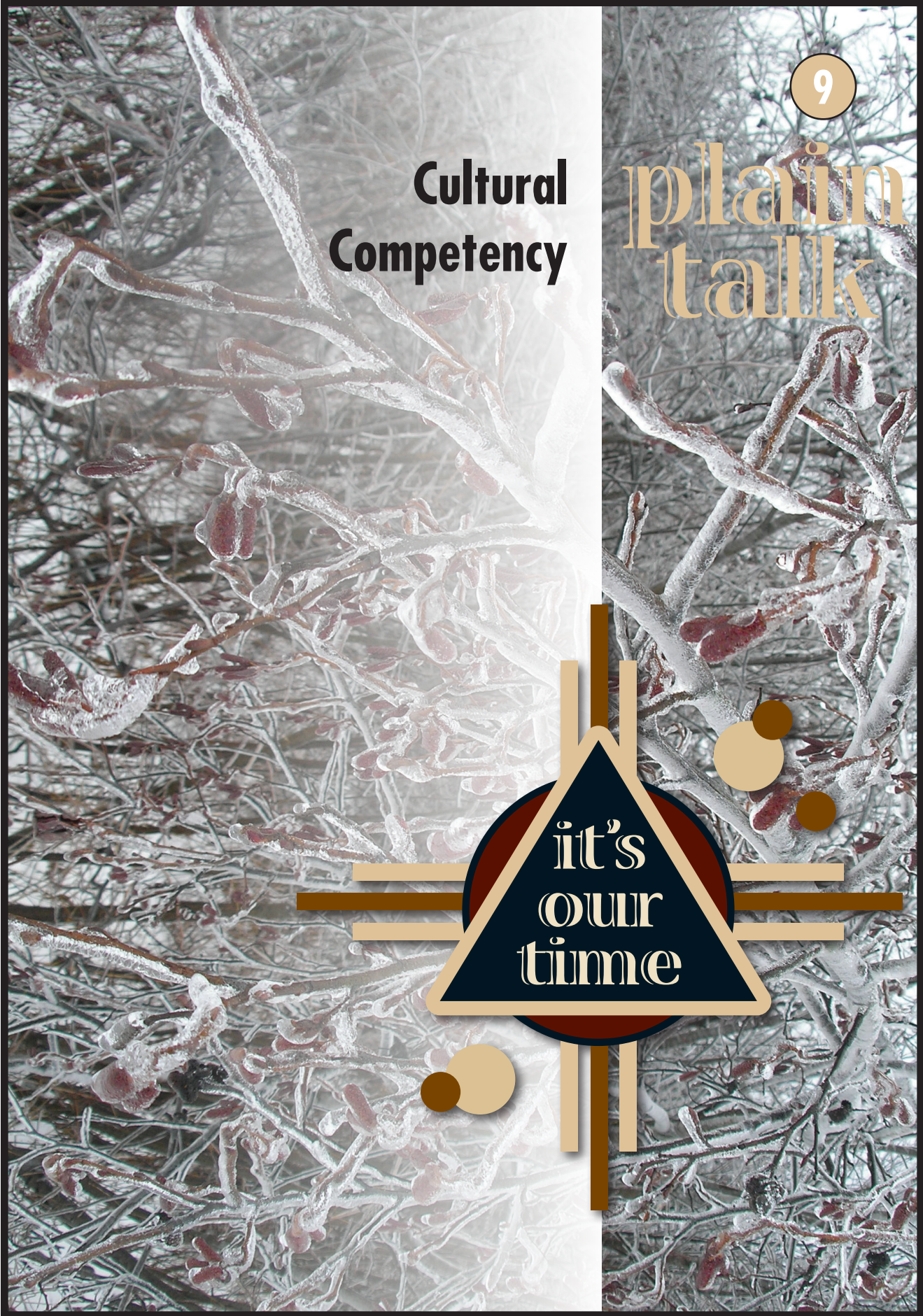


**Cultural
Competency**

plain
talk

it's
our
time



What is Cultural Competency?

The terms “cultural competency” and “cultural competence” or “cultural proficiency” have become important in recent years because they address issues that are inherent parts of pluralistic societies that are composed of different cultures.

“Culture” is defined in many different ways, but all the definitions share common characteristics. **The Western and Northern Canadian Protocol (WNCP)** version is representative: ***Culture consists of the customs, history, values and languages that make up the heritage of a person or people and contribute to that person’s or people’s identity.***

The authors of **Culturally Proficient Inquiry: A Lens for Identifying and Examining Educational Gaps** provide a succinct summary of the importance of the concept of culture:

- Culture is a predominant force in shaping values, behaviours and institutions.
- People are served in varying degrees by the dominant culture.
- There is diversity within and between cultures and both are important.
- Every group has unique culturally defined needs that must be respected.
- People have personal identities and group identities. The dignity of individuals is not guaranteed unless the dignity of the collective is also preserved.
- Each cultural group has unique cultural needs.
- The best of both worlds enhances the capacity of all.
- The family, as defined by each culture, is the primary system of support in the education of children.
- School systems must recognize that marginalized populations have to be at least bicultural and that this status creates a unique set of issues to which the system must be equipped to respond.

There is no universally accepted definition of the concept of cultural **competency**. However, all definitions share common characteristics. In this document ***cultural competency is defined as the capacity to interact compassionately, sensitively and effectively with people of different cultures.*** Cultural competency is expressed in ways that recognize the value of the diverse worldviews and cultures of other people—their behaviour, spirituality, beliefs, customs, language, attitudes, gender, social status, economic status, and so on.

Why is Cultural Competency Important?

There are tangible benefits for organizations and institutions that incorporate a cultural competency framework within their operations. These advantages are summarized in **A Guide for Cultural Competency Application of the Canadian Code**:



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- Increases inclusiveness, accessibility and equity;
- Fosters human resources that are reflective of and responsive to a diversity of communities;
- Creates a climate where discrimination and oppressive attitudes and behaviours are not tolerated;
- Values cultural differences;
- Promotes human rights and the elimination of systemic biases and barriers;
- Practices self-awareness and self-reflection;
- Demonstrates personal responsibility and accountability.

Healthcare professionals have long known that cultural factors (language, beliefs, customs, behaviours, etc.) can have profound consequences on the delivery, quality and outcome of medical and psychological services.

Subsequently, other professionals in other segments of society have recognized the importance and value of incorporating cultural competency considerations into their policies and practices. Cultural competency principles play an important role in a multicultural country like Canada, in healthcare, business, governance, and education.

With respect to education, cultural competency principles are absolutely crucial to the success of First Nation, Métis, and Inuit students. Educational practices that are sensitive to the distinctive characteristics of First Nation cultures impact First Nations students in many different ways—their safety and comfort, their learning potential, communication, and their self-confidence and self-assurance as members of First Nations.

The application of a cultural competency perspective and philosophy can take different forms in different contexts. For example, Alberta's **Mother Earth's Children's Charter School** is "founded on Indigenous teachings that foster students' self-confidence and self-respect, increasing their appreciation of the cultural connections to Mother Earth." The School, which provides programming for First Nation students from Kindergarten to grade 9, has adopted the following Guiding Principles:

1. Parents are the primary educators of their children.
2. Each child is a gift who has his/her unique place in creation.
3. Each child will receive curriculum that follows Alberta Education's Program of Studies.
4. Respect for self, for others, for the property of others and for all living things will be reinforced.

The Practice of Cultural Competency in First Nations Education

Cultural competency is a mindset or way of viewing the world. For those who commit to culturally competent practices it represents a paradigmatic shift from viewing others as problematic to viewing how one works with people different from one's self in a manner to insure effective practices. Cultural competency in First Nations education means adopting and implementing a number of relevant practices and strategies, including:

- Explore and assess one's own tendencies to express stereotypes or biases.
- Become aware of how your own culture may influence how you react to the culture of others.
- Understand that there may be different standards and expectations of decorum in a classroom.
- Accept that being a member of a dominant group confers advantages or privileges.
- Accept that being a member of a dominant group confers responsibility for change.
- Identify and deal with stereotypes and biases in educational resources.
- Value diversity, accept and respect differences in points of view, experiences and relationships.
- Be open to understanding and working with First Nations individuals and groups.
- Understand that conflict may be due to cultural factors, not differences in personalities.
- Share insights into cultural knowledge with colleagues.
- Incorporate knowledge of First Nations perspectives into educational practices.

The Dimensions of Cultural Competency in First Nations Education

Culturally competent First Nations education involves acknowledgement of the values and characteristics of First Nations cultures as well as of the events and circumstances that influence First Nations quality of life, whether on the prairies, woodlands, or on the west coast. These values, characteristics and events are "dimensions" of cultural competency in First Nations Education. Some of these dimensions of cultural competency are summarized below. The rich diversity of First Nations cultures from coast to coast to coast is reflected in the variety of expressions of the dimensions. Although this is but a brief sampling of First Nations cultures, it is a starting point for dialogue and conversations with local resource people and traditional knowledge keepers in your communities.

Elders

Elders are community members who have the respect of the people because of their wisdom and knowledge of traditional customs, language and culture, regardless of age or gender.



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Elders earn this status through their dedication, experience, and understanding of the need to strive for balance and harmony with all living things, and are often consulted on issues in the community. One of the best ways to approach an Elder, especially if you are from outside the community, is to introduce yourself by telling them your first and last name and giving them background information about who your parents and grandparents are and which community you are from. Then you may present your gift of tobacco and ask the Elder for guidance. This gives the Elder the opportunity to decide if he or she will be your teacher, or if they will refer you to someone else.

How to Present Tobacco

Elders must be offered tobacco when you ask them to share their knowledge. When giving tobacco, place it in front of the Elder and state your request. The Elder indicates acceptance of your request by picking up the tobacco. If you hand it directly to the Elder you do not give him/her the opportunity to accept or pass on your request—it takes away their choice. Always speak to the tobacco when making your request, BEFORE handing the Elder the tobacco.

A small amount of tobacco is generally wrapped in a small piece of broadcloth and tied with a thread or piece of yarn. These are called tobacco ties. The cloth is usually in one of the four sacred colours—red, white, yellow, or black, although red is most common, and if you don't have those colours, it's acceptable to use other cloth. The minimum amount of tobacco is the amount needed to use in a Ceremonial Pipe (about the size of a walnut), but giving a pouch of tobacco is also acceptable. Offer a cigarette only as a last resort. Tobacco is a sacred medicine and only commercial tobacco or tobacco in its natural form (kinikinik) is acceptable. Some people have asked if a mixture of 'healthy' herbs or other medicines can be used instead of tobacco. The answer is NO. Whatever your views are on tobacco, it is still a sacred medicine to traditional First Nations people.

How to Find an Elder or Resource Person

Don't feel you are alone on this path of developing cultural competency. Every First Nation community has people who are willing and able to visit schools and to share their knowledge and wisdom. If you are looking to connect with your local First Nations community, the local school is a great start. If there is no local school, connect with the teachers of First Nations students in your area. If you ARE the teacher, connect with your students and ask them who in their community practices traditional activities and attends ceremonies. If you are still not having any luck, contact the regional First Nations political office (every province and territory has them), or the Assembly of First Nations, and ask for Education contacts in your area. Sometimes it takes a little patience, because there is still mistrust in communities, but cultivating relationships with your local First Nations will definitely be worth it!

Sacred Medicines

Sweet grass, sage, cedar and tobacco are sacred plants that have traditional healing, ceremonial and spiritual meanings and applications. These sacred medicines are used individually or mixed together and burned, in a process called smudging, to produce smoke that cleanses and purifies the mind, body, and spirit. **First Nations Teachings & Practices** on the prairies, woodlands, and in the north describes this use of the sacred medicines:

They are used to smudge the mind so you can think clearly, your ears so you can hear the good things in life of others and of yourself; your mouth so you can speak of good things and say kind words to one another; your heart so you can feel good about yourself and others; and lastly you smudge your whole self so you can be blessed for the day.

Talking Circles

Talking circles are a striking example of First Nations respect for others. Individuals in a group of people, often sitting in a circle, are given an opportunity to talk about their opinions and feelings without being interrupted. The person talking holds an object like a feather or a talking stick, or even a stone, and the group understands that the person speaking should be listened to with courtesy and concern. A person may disagree with another's opinion, but they must express themselves during their turn to speak only. When the speaker passes the object to another person in the group, it is a signal for that other person to express their thoughts and ideas.

Sweat Lodge Ceremonies

Sweat Lodges, usually dome-shaped and round structures, are a place for spiritual, mental and physical renewal. People enter a Sweat Lodge according to certain rituals and customs. Inside, water is poured on hot rocks to produce steam and high temperatures, and additional rituals can be performed to help people inside the Sweat Lodge undergo purification and cleansing. There are many communities offering these ceremonies to those interested in participating and learning more about First Nations culture.

Medicine Wheel

The Medicine Circle, also known as the Medicine Wheel, is used by First Nations in different ways as symbolic representation of the four directions (north, south, east and west), the four elements of nature (air, fire, water, and earth), the four seasons (winter, spring, summer, fall), the four human races represented as the four sacred colours (red, white, yellow, and black), the four stages of life (infant/child, adolescent, adult, and elder) or the four dimensions of personal development (mental, emotional, physical, and spiritual). Different Nations will also have four different spirit animals to represent each aspect of the Wheel.

Regalia

Regalia is the proper term for the outfits (clothing and adornments) dancers wear at traditional gatherings and ceremonies including Pow wows and Sun Dances. There is much meaning and symbolism in the colours and choices of accessories that regalia makers use. Some of this information is very old and traditional and has been passed down through many generations. Regalia may be passed down from or made by friends and relatives, or made by the dancers themselves or by professional artists. A variety of skills are involved—leatherworking, sewing, beading, colour selection, for example. Regalia also matches the style of dancing (Grass, Jingle, Fancy).



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Storytelling

Storytelling connects individuals to their past, their legends, their history, their identity, and their culture. Every First Nation has its own stories that reflect and reinforce the society and its values. Some stories are at the very foundation of the society. A vivid example is the story of The Peacemaker, as described and adapted from Onondaga Nation: People of the Hills.

The Creator, saddened because the Mohawk, Seneca, Cayuga, Onondaga, and Oneida people were continuously engaged in war against each other, sent a messenger called the Great Peacemaker, a prophet and spiritual leader, to talk to the five First Nations. The Peacemaker, traveling in a stone canoe to show that his words are true, sought out the warring leaders of the warring Nations. A person named Hiawatha decided to help the Peacemaker to spread the good words of the Creator. However, an evil Onondaga man tried to stop the spread of the words of peace by killing Hiawatha's daughter.

Overwhelmed by grief, Hiawatha found a way to console others who had lost loved ones. To remember and pass on these consoling words, he strung together purple and white fresh water clamshells together on strings. This became the first wampum. Strengthened by his adversity, Hiawatha and the Peacemaker spread the message of peace and earned the support of leaders of all of the five Nations. They symbolized this union of peace by uprooting a great white pine tree and threw their weapons of war into the hole. They replanted the tree and the Peacemaker placed an eagle on top to warn the Haudenosaunee, the People of the Longhouse, of any dangers to this great peace. The Hiawatha Belt was made as a record that the Five Nations joined together in peace.

Medicine Pouch

A medicine pouch is a sacred item that contains medicines like tobacco, sweet grass, sage, and cedar, as well as any other objects that are important to the carrier. It can be any size, colour, or design, although many people prefer them made of hide or leather. Generally the medicine pouch is worn around the neck or waist or carried in a pocket. Some carry theirs at all times, while others wear them only on special occasions. A medicine pouch represents spiritual protection to its owner.

Drum

Drums are sacred objects found almost universally in all First Nations communities throughout the country. It is often said that the sound of the drum represents the heartbeat of Mother Earth, the giver of life, and helps to send messages to the Creator. Drums are traditionally played during ceremonies and celebrations. First Nations peoples have created various types of drums, usually made of carved wood and animal hides.

Pipe

The pipe is smoked on ceremonial occasions, as a means of communication with the Great Spirit or Creator. Sacred pipe ceremonies are performed in different ways depending on the teachings of the Pipe Carrier, a person who learned cultural teachings from Elders, or who was born to the role, depending on the traditions of the First Nation. The bowl of the pipe represents the female aspect, while the stem represents the male aspect. Together the pipe symbolizes union and balance of female and male.

Pow Wow

The Pow Wow is an opportunity for First Nations peoples to gather, socialize, celebrate and share cultural activities like dancing, drumming, and feasting according to certain protocols. Traditional practices like sunrise, sunset and pipe ceremonies may take place.

Potlatch

The potlatch is a traditional gathering held by many of the coastal Indigenous groups. The word itself, which may be derived from the Nootka word *pachtile*, is a Chinook Jargon word that means to give. The Gitskan today call the same event *The Feast*, and the Cowichan know it as *the Great Deed*. The different names of the potlatch reflect both the different languages and cultures that share this tradition, as well as indicating some of the different occasions for which a potlatch is held. The potlatch was also a primary means of distributing wealth. The ceremony culminated with the host presenting gifts to every guest which strictly corresponded with each individual's social rank. Gifts could include canoes, carved dishes and eulachon oil.

The more wealth distributed the greater prestige was conferred upon the host. In return, the higher status guests were expected to hold their own potlatches where they would give even more lavishly. Thus, even if an individual hosting a potlatch completely impoverished himself, he could expect the return of wealth when he attended subsequent potlatches as a guest.

The federal government outlawed potlatches in 1884 but the ceremony continued in many communities, and in 1951 the law was deleted from the revised Indian Act. Today potlatches still occur, but the gifts tend to be money or practical household items and they usually last only a weekend, while in the past they may have gone on for two or three weeks. Many Nations throughout Canada practice some form of gift giving or give-away during feasts, celebrations, and ceremonies.

Eagle

The eagle symbolizes qualities that are important to First Nations—great courage, strength, and vision, and acts as a messenger between people and the Creator. Eagle feathers must always be treated with deep respect.



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Songs

Traditional songs are important parts of ceremonies and celebrations, as a form of prayer and respect for the Creator. First Nations usually have a signature song that represents their Nation.

Dance

Dancing is a form of prayer and respect for the Creator. The many styles of dancing, regalia and adornments represent historical and cultural events and teachings.

Smudging

Healing oneself or another must be preceded by the elimination or cleansing of negative thoughts and feelings. This can be achieved by smudging, which involves the burning of certain herbs like sage, cedar and sweet grass, collecting the smoke with one's hands, and rubbing or brushing the smoke over one's body.

Indigenous Knowledge

Although the Western worldview permeates and dominates current information and education systems, there is a growing awareness of the richness of knowledge that exists within First Nations perspectives and experiences. Value must be assigned to traditional and oral knowledge, including Indigenous worldviews concerning the nature of learning, spirituality, and creation stories

Indigenous contributions

Indigenous peoples invented and developed a rich variety of techniques and innovations in a wide range of areas, including transportation and navigation, health maintenance and improvement, recreational and competitive sports, and nutrition and food supply.

Some examples of Indigenous contributions:

- birch bark canoe
- corn
- maple syrup
- lacrosse
- snowshoes
- wild rice
- toboggan
- kayak
- vitamin C-rich cures for scurvy
- moccasins
- boomerang (Australian aborigine)
- snow goggles
- chewing gum from spruce sap
- petroleum jelly for skin protection
- willow bark as a pain killer, the main ingredient in Aspirin (acetylsalicylic acid)
- pine tree tea for coughs
- chocolate (Mayans)

Biases and Stereotypes

Cultural competency also involves avoiding and correcting biases and stereotypes in current and historical sources of information. Biases may take many forms. Examples of bias include omitting relevant information, referring to negative attributes and ignoring positive attributes, using unverified and invalid statements, perpetuating stereotypes, and making generalizations.

Jessica Diemer-Eaton offers important insights into the kinds of stereotypes that might creep into the classroom:

1. Reject insulting, hurtful and disrespectful terminology.
2. Avoid concepts like Indian people wasted nothing; in fact this idea is neither unique to Indigenous people nor is it entirely accurate.
3. Reject the incorrect belief that Indigenous people didn't believe in owning land; in fact, First Nations people did practice land ownership, including tribal territories, communal lands, family camps, and agricultural use of land.
4. Reject an incorrect belief that Indigenous people were passive inhabitants of the land; in fact, Indigenous people used various methods of changing their environment, exploited deposits of copper, managed the undergrowth of forests by annual burning, created and developed agricultural crops like corn, tapped maple trees for their sugar, and engaged in other creative ways of interacting with their environment.
5. Recognize that nomadic patterns of life were not characteristic of all Indigenous people; many First Nations lived in settlements either year-round or for most seasons.
6. Acknowledge that Indigenous people were not necessarily taken advantage of in trading with Europeans. Rather, Indigenous people were active and often demanding participants in their trading interactions with Europeans. For example, Europeans may have traded silk, glass, copper and silver for old, worn and torn beaver furs.

Colonization

Colonization refers to the process by which a country or nation takes control of an area outside of its borders and then sends its citizens to live in the controlled area. From the time Europeans arrived in North America, an event often referred to as "contact," First Nations have been subjected to profoundly devastating consequences of colonization by European nations. **Plain Talk 3: Impacts of Contact** summarizes these effects of colonization on First Nations peoples and cultures.

Residential Schools

Residential schools were boarding schools for Indigenous (First Nation, Inuit and Métis) children and youth. The political thinking of the time sought to *kill the Indian in the child and civilize* Indian children by separating them from their heritage and customs and indoctrinating them to European and Christian ways. Pursuant to the Indian Act and financed by the Department of Indian and Northern Affairs and the Federal Government, the forced separation of children from their families through the Residential School system started in the 1800s. The schools were staffed and run by Christian religious institutions. Youth were prevented from acquiring the skills,



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knowledge, attitudes and understandings of their First Nations cultures. Many youth suffered humiliation, deprivation, and physical, sexual and psychological abuse in the residential schools. As adults, many of these students led disrupted lives of pain and confusion that had negative influences of other members of their communities. **Plain Talk 6: Residential Schools** provides more information about the residential school tragedy.

Treaties

Treaties are agreements made between groups of people. Treaties are part of the heritage of First Nations peoples, who entered into agreements with other First Nations about sharing lands for hunting and trapping long before the arrival of Europeans in North America. European nations worked out a number of different arrangements with Indigenous nations. The history, interpretation and implementation of treaties have been, and continue to be, contentious and controversial. Critics have argued that all treaties between Indigenous peoples and Canadian governments are potentially flawed and subject to re-examination. **Plain Talk 4: Treaties** discusses the complexities surrounding treaty disputes.

Transcendental Meditation (TM) and the Quiet Time

In 2008 Maharishi Mahesh Yogi, the founder of TM and the Global Country of World Peace (GCWP), declared, "Indigenous Peoples are the custodians of Natural Law," and must be supported as leaders in this development. Since the November 2, 2010, Global Conference on Health: *First Nations as Custodians of Natural Law in Restoring Healthy Sustainable First Nations Communities*, interest and momentum has been building on Traditional Natural Law based approaches such as the practice of TM and the Quiet Time program in First Nations schools and communities. The symposium addressed the First Nations' social determinants of health in the areas of education, culture, health, languages, housing, environment, and economic development. The conference also shed light on this five thousand year old ancient Vedic Indigenous knowledge and practice of TM. TM is not a religion, philosophy nor lifestyle; and complements First Nations traditional ceremonies and teachings and is world-renowned as a scientifically evidence-based tool for creating social cohesion and self-development. Over the past 40 years, some First Nations people have been practicing TM. Links to the Traditional Natural-Law based programs of Transcendental Meditation and the Quiet Time Programs include

<http://www.davidlynchfoundation.org/american-indian.html> and
<https://consciousnessbasededucation.org>.

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www.edu.gov.mb.ca/k12/cur/socstud/foundation_gr2/blms/2-2-1c.pdf

www.nih.gov/clearcommunication/culturalcompetency.htm

Kinikinik the play is available on the USB stick provided with this Kit or can be downloaded at <http://www.trcm.ca/>
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*The contrary winds may blow strong
in my face, yet I will go forward
and never turn back.
Teedyuscung, Lenape*

