After reading this module, you should be able to:

- List the 25 steps teachers can take to improve First Nations, Métis, and Inuit student success.
- Explain culturally responsive education and describe a classroom activity that incorporates Aboriginal culture into your lesson.
- Describe two ways in which you can involve members of the Aboriginal community in the education occurring in your classroom.
- Compare and contrast teaching circles, talking circles and restorative justice circles, and list three benefits of using a circle seating plan.
- Describe two methods of incorporating culturally relevant materials into your classroom.
- List the seven distinct intelligences identified by Howard Gardner, and explain how and why teachers should use a multiple intelligence checklist.
PART 1: OVERVIEW

Why do we need to learn about First Nations, Métis, and Inuit student success? Why can’t we just keep doing what has always been done in terms of educating all students? The answer is that what has been done is not working for these students. The First Nations, Métis, and Inuit populations are the fastest growing populations in Canada and our education system is letting them down.

Between 1996 and 2006, the Aboriginal population in Canada increased by 45 percent, nearly six times faster than the 8 percent rate of growth for the non-Aboriginal population over the same period.

Of the three Aboriginal groups, the fastest gain in population between 1996 and 2006 occurred among those who identified themselves as Métis. According to the 2008 census, their numbers almost doubled (+91 percent) to an estimated 389,785. This growth rate was nearly three times as fast as the 29 percent increase in First Nations people, whose numbers reached 698,025. The number of people who identified themselves as Inuit increased 26 percent to 50,485 (Statistics Canada, 2008). The same census tells us that the median age for non-Aboriginal people in 2006 was 40 years, while it was 25 years for First Nations people, 30 years for Métis, and 22 years for Inuit. As mentioned above, the 1996–2006 growth rate for the Aboriginal population increased by 45 percent, while the population growth rate for non-Aboriginal people increased by 8 percent. This means that our Aboriginal populations are young and increasing rapidly. These are our students.

The most recent census, taken in 2011, also shows that the Aboriginal population remains young:

In 2006, an estimated 1.3 million people reported an Aboriginal identity, accounting for 3.9 percent of the Canadian population.

Among them, 785,000 were North American Indians, 404,000 were Métis, and 53,000 were Inuit.

All scenarios also show that the population of the three Aboriginal identity groups (First Nations/North American Indians, Métis, and Inuit) would still remain younger than the non-Aboriginal population as of 2031.

The median age of Aboriginal people would rise from 27 years in 2006 to between 35 and 37 in 2031. The youngest Aboriginal population group would still be the Inuit and the oldest would still be the Métis. In comparison, the median age of the non-Aboriginal population in 2031 would be around 43 years (Statistics Canada, 2011; see Figure 1).

The gap in student achievement between Aboriginal students and non-Aboriginal students is large, as is the dropout rate. Statistics Canada reports that Aboriginal youth have much higher dropout rates than non-Aboriginal youth:

Previous research into the dropout rates for Aboriginal people indicated that young Aboriginal people were more likely to drop out than non-Aboriginals. According to Labour Force Survey data for 2007–2010, the dropout rate among First Nations people living off-reserve, Métis, and Inuit aged 20 to 24 was 22.6 percent, compared to 8.5 percent for non-Aboriginal people. By Aboriginal group, the dropout rate among young off-reserve First Nations people (North American Indians) was 25.8 percent, and for Métis, 18.9 percent. (Gilmore, 2010)

Most provincial/territorial ministries of education have put forward plans for First Nations, Métis, and Inuit success including closing the gap in achievement, increasing public trust, and increasing the graduation rate of Aboriginal students.
In 2008, the Council of Ministers of Education (CMEC) developed Learn Canada 2020, a declaration aimed at improving education systems, learning opportunities, and overall education outcomes across Canada. Through Learn Canada 2020, ministers of education recognize the direct link between a well-educated population and a socially progressive, sustainable society. Learn Canada 2020 also identified ministers' objective to eliminate the gaps in academic achievement and graduation rates between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students across Canada. Based on the belief that all Canadians have the reasonable expectation of benefitting from education, CMEC initiated a gathering to "establish a new relationship among leaders in Aboriginal education that respects jurisdiction and develops consensus on shared opportunities (The Council of Ministers of Education, 2010)." Teachers and teacher candidates should check their provincial or territorial ministry's documents:

Alberta: http://education.alberta.ca
British Columbia: www.gov.bc.ca/bced
Manitoba: www.edu.gov.mb.ca/edu
New Brunswick: www.gnb.ca/education
Newfoundland and Labrador: www.gov.nl.ca/edu
Northwest Territories: www.ece.gov.nt.ca
Nova Scotia: www.ednet.ns.ca
Nunavut: www.edu.gov.nu.ca
Ontario: www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng
Prince Edward Island: www.gov.pe.ca/education
Quebec: www.mels.gouv.qc.ca
Saskatchewan: www.education.gov.sk.ca
Yukon: www.education.gov.yk.ca

A large part of the gap in achievement is due to the gap in funding between provincially funded schools and federally funded schools. (The schools on reserves or in Inuit communities are federally funded.) The gap in funding was created because since 1996, there has been a 2 percent increase per year in federal funding, while for provincially funded schools, there has been no such cap on funding. "The AFN, taking into account the

Figure 1  Age in Years of Specified Populations

Source: Author, based on data projections from Statistics Canada's 2011 census.
different financial arrangements with the provinces, estimates [the gap] at $3,400 per child” (“Ottawa should close gap in funding,” The Globe and Mail Editorial, 2012).

Federally funded “schools” are often groups of portables, without gymnasiums, libraries, etc. Ontario regional chief Angus Toulouse has this to say:

First Nations education is in crisis. In some First Nations communities a staggering 7 out of 10 First Nations students will not graduate from high school this year. In far too many others, countless First Nations children will never attend a school equipped with libraries, science and technology labs or athletic facilities. And incredibly, in a country as rich as ours, some First Nations children will never set foot in a proper school.” (Canadian Standing Senate Committee on Aboriginal Peoples, 2011, p. 1.)

In addition, as the Métis Nation of Ontario notes,

The educational outcomes of Aboriginal students, including Métis students, found in metropolitan areas are improving. There are signs of progress. Despite these successes, generally, the numbers of Aboriginal students impacted on remains marginal and the situation is such that the opportunity for Aboriginal students to access an equitable education remains unrealized. The MNO is committed to improved education outcomes for Métis students. The MNO believes that the provision of a quality education will produce Métis students who are contributing and productive citizens of a changing and complex knowledge-based Canadian economy and society. (From, “A Metis Education Action Plan,” by The Metis Nation of Ontario, 2008, p. 4.)

So, given that we cannot directly change the funding formula, what can we do in our classrooms to increase First Nations, Métis, and Inuit student success? Here is an easy-to-follow, multi-step plan. (Don’t worry: while every step is important, much like a dance, the steps can be taken in any order.)

**STEP 1: LEARN AS MUCH AS YOU CAN ABOUT ABORIGINAL HISTORY AND CULTURE**

Particularly the history and culture of the Aboriginal people in the area in which you teach. Find community members to help with your learning. Check out the friendship centres, or community groups such as the local Métis group. The band office could help with traditional teachers and traditional teachings, and grassroots groups such as Idle No More offer teachers in many communities to help people learn about the treaties and the history of Canada’s Aboriginal peoples. While it may seem easier to find such centres in large urban areas, many small rural communities also have friendship centres, community groups, and reservations. Search engines can help in the quest to find community members. (I Google “friendship centres” and it gives me a list for my entire province, then I just have to call the nearest one.)

Take an online course in Aboriginal studies. Once you know about the histories of our Aboriginal peoples, then you will have a better understanding of the needs of the First Nations, Métis, and Inuit students in your classroom. You do not need to become an expert on all things Aboriginal—just show an interest. Asking your students to share their history with you might work in some cases, but in many cases the students do not know enough about their heritage and history because for a few generations, many Aboriginal people denied their heritage, preferring to tell people that they were Italian, or French, to avoid negative stereotypes. Many teachers and teacher candidates feel that they did not learn about the history of First Nations, Métis, and Inuit people of Canada while they were in school and therefore feel nervous teaching about Aboriginal peoples because they do not wish to be disrespectful or disingenuous. Approach every topic with respect, and you will succeed.

See Part 2—Practical Application, Activating Activities, Activity 1: What Do You Know?
STEP 2: FIND OUT HOW MANY OF YOUR STUDENTS SELF-IDENTIFY AS FIRST NATIONS, MÉTIS, OR INUIT

You may be surprised. I remember a few years ago talking about this topic with my principal. I told her that there were a large number of Aboriginal students in my class. She disagreed, stating that there was only one in my room. She was basing her assumption on the outward appearance of my students, the majority of whom were blond and blue-eyed. Aboriginal students come in every shade of skin colour and can have every shade of eye or hair colour. Do not fall into the trap of assuming that just because someone does not look “traditional” that they are not Aboriginal. Many school boards have voluntary self-identification. Some people will self-identify, others will not. It is a matter of trust. Back when I was in school, we did not self-identify. Those who did were placed in the "occupational" stream because it was thought that we could not excel in school. Bias was blatant. First Nations, Métis, and Inuit students are just as capable as any other student. Teachers and teacher candidates will have to develop trust with the students and their community in order for them to feel safe with self-identification. My students are proud to self-identify to me as they know my heritage and they see my pride. The Aboriginal students in my class feel validated and safe. Showing care for and respect of First Nations, Métis, and Inuit people by speaking positively about their heritage and culture and encouraging a sense of pride amongst the students will also help them want to self-identify. Bringing in Aboriginal role models to your classroom or school will also help to develop that sense of pride, which will make the students want to self-identify. One teenaged boy I had taught for two years had never disclosed to me he that was Aboriginal. At the end of the second year, when I had invited a carver come to show his art on National Aboriginal Day, he told the artist that he was Micmac from Nova Scotia. Apparently he had never told me because I taught French and he didn’t know how to say it in French.

STEP 3: EMPHASIZE CULTURALLY RESPONSIVE EDUCATION

Culturally relevant instruction, or culturally-responsive education, involves celebrating the culture and heritage of the students in the class. Now that your students have self-identified, it is time to learn about their cultures because not all Aboriginal people have the same culture, traditions, or beliefs. This is important for all of your students, not just the Aboriginal ones. Get to know about the culture of each student. Ask them about their heritage. Ask this early in the school year, like September or the start of second semester if that is when you first meet the students. Some students may not know about their background. Have them check with their parents/grandparents/guardians. (For adopted and or foster children, this may prove difficult; therefore, sensitivity is essential. I generally have them ask about the culture of the family with whom they live, which may or may not be the same as their own heritage.) What traditions do they celebrate? What kinds of things do the members of their family enjoy doing together? Try to incorporate elements from the students’ various cultures and backgrounds into your lessons. Have a heritage day, or an "all about me" day when the students can share elements of their heritage with their peers. If you know about the culture of your students, then you can be more culturally sensitive to their needs and can work at making everyone welcome in your class. Teaching and learning about individual differences and celebrating our differences as well as the things we have in common help us all to grow as community members. In this era of globalization, learning about each other is ever more important. Encouraging and teaching your students to celebrate their own heritage and to welcome the heritage of others, plants seeds for success.
for all students. This is particularly important for First Nations, Métis, and Inuit students as their cultures have been pushed aside since first European contact in order for the Aboriginal people to be assimilated into the dominant culture. Culturally responsive education also involves the community. Bring in members of the community to help plan lessons that celebrate the heritage of the community members and of your students.

For more about culturally relevant instruction, see

- Part 2—Practical Application, Activating Activities, Activity 3: Culturally Responsive Education (CRE) and the First Nations, Métis, and Inuit Student—Drumming
- Part 3—Case Studies, Case Study 3: Drum-Making and Culturally Responsive Education

STEP 4: RECOGNIZE INTER-GENERATIONAL TRAUMA

Residential schools did not just affect the students who attended them; their horror continues to affect the students we teach today. Generations of children were torn from their parents’ loving and caring arms and taken to sterile residential schools sometimes hundreds of kilometres from their families. Their hair was cut; they were made to wear uniforms and were forbidden to speak their own language. They were often mistreated and underfed. Over 3,000 children died while attending residential schools. Their parents were often not informed of the deaths until months later. The people who ran the schools were not nurturing and some were abusive. The students who attended the schools were not treated with compassion. All of this led to generations of people who might not know how to parent, having not seen good parenting once they were taken away. Loving families were torn apart. The after-effects of residential school still haunt many people today and have compromised the ability of some residential school survivors to parent and to raise their own children. There is mistrust in the educational system and in the government. This comes through in the behaviour of some students and in the reactions of their parents. Remember again that Aboriginal students come in all colours, so inter-generational trauma may be affecting the students in your class. Find out if the parents of the students in your class attended residential schools. You will need to work doubly hard to gain enough of their trust for them to see you at interview time, or for the parents to talk to you about their child's progress.

See Part 2—Practical Application, Taking Action Activities, Activity 1: Interviewing Someone from an Aboriginal Community about Residential School.

STEP 5: COMMUNICATE WITH PARENTS/GUARDIANS

This might have you nervous now after reading Step 4. Don’t worry—approach each person with respect and caring. Start with producing a class newsletter because it is non-threatening and can be read at their leisure. If the parent/guardian cannot read, the child can either read it to them or can remember some of the highlights. (I suggest you go over the newsletter with your class before sending it home or posting on your class website.) Communication should be regular. Aim for providing a newsletter at least once a month. Between newsletters, a quick note in the student agenda to highlight something positive that the student accomplished, or something that happened in the school yard, helps to keep the parent in the loop. Invite all parents/guardians to the open house (that most schools host) at the start of the school year. Be certain to make all those who attend feel welcome.
Note the names of students who have nobody show up for the open house. Make a point of phoning those parents/guardians with a good news item about their child shortly after the open house. Try to make your first communication positive. Let the parent/guardian know that together you are a team, both striving for the best for their child. Encourage parents to contact you either in writing or by phone. Open communication is important. While you are talking with the parents/guardians, ask if they might be willing to come speak with your class about some aspect of their culture. Many will say no, but some will be honoured to share with the students. Start your community connections early. Maybe they know a storyteller who would share his or her knowledge with you and your students.

STEP 6: REMEMBER THAT IT TAKES A COMMUNITY TO RAISE A CHILD

While this idea is based on the African proverb “It takes a village to raise a child,” the same holds true in Aboriginal communities. Get everyone in the community involved in the education that occurs in your class, and find ways to include Aboriginal people in your classroom. Involve elders, senators, storytellers, artists, authors, community, and family members in instruction. This cannot be emphasized enough. First Nations, Métis, and Inuit students need to see themselves reflected in the teaching personnel and school volunteers. Encourage parents of the Aboriginal students in your class to volunteer as chaperones for class trips; this is a gentle way of introducing them to your class, as the onus for instruction is not placed on them, and yet they can offer a wealth of incidental instruction during the course of the day. Aboriginal volunteers at the outdoor education centre might be willing to share knowledge that they have about certain plants or trees. An Aboriginal parent once shared a sumac cough medicine recipe with my students when we were outside looking at the variety of trees and shrubs in our surroundings. He also pointed out various other plants and described traditional uses for them. Of course, you cannot assume that because a person is Aboriginal, he or she will have knowledge about plants as medicines. My class just got lucky. . . maybe you will too. Inviting community members to participate in cooking projects is also a good way to get them involved. Everyone loves to eat, and nothing gets a student’s attention faster than food. Perhaps parents or grandparents could share a favourite recipe with the class and, together with the parent or grandparent, the class could prepare the recipe. I have used cooking projects with students in primary, junior, and intermediate grades. For senior grades, I have brought in dancers or taught traditional Métis dances myself to a colleague’s classes. We just swapped teaching roles for the day; he taught my elementary students and I taught his secondary students. Intermediate and senior classes may also enjoy a visit from a fur trapper who could explain the various traps and trap lines and show some pelts. See also

- Part 2—Practical Application, Action-Based Research Activities, Activity 4: Hosting a Feast
- Part 2—Practical Application, Action-Based Research Activities, Activity 5: Cooking in Class

STEP 7: ESTABLISH DISCIPLINE

Be sure to establish discipline from the start of the first day of the school year. This is important for student self-regulation and for encouraging positive group behaviour. Many school boards like to emphasize virtues or character traits and have a different trait to emphasize each month as they endeavour to create a more caring and equitable society. As an Anishinaabe teacher, I tie classroom discipline into the Seven Grandfather Teachings, which are
character traits or gifts from the grandfathers needed to survive in a community. Specifically they are humility, respect, love, courage, truth, honesty, and wisdom. For lessons about the Seven Grandfather Teachings, consult websites such as

- [www.rabbitandbearpaws.com](http://www.rabbitandbearpaws.com) for primary grades,

From the start, students and teacher should develop rules for the classroom together, and review these rules regularly to determine if a rule is still necessary and appropriate or if it needs to be rephrased or dropped altogether, or if new rules need to be created. The rules are posted for all to see and to remind us how to treat each other with respect and love. I always have a baseline set of rules in mind before asking for student input, and then we develop the rules together at the start of the term or school year, making sure all of the rules that I wanted are included in the list. Some examples of primary classroom behaviour rules could be

1. Be polite and respectful (e.g., do not interrupt or distract others).
2. Help someone in need (offer to get a band-aid, or console someone who is sad; help another student with work but do not let the student copy yours because that is not helping as it is creating a dependency).
3. If you borrow something, return it to the proper place.
4. Compliment others. Speak positively; this is a “no put-down” zone.

We hold restorative justice circles when someone in our class has been wronged or if the rules are broken. The restorative justice circle is based on the Aboriginal healing circle and focuses on healing the harm. We talk and try to find solutions to problems together. Everyone gets a chance to speak. This method develops the interpersonal skills of the students and creates empathy. It holds the wrong-doer responsible and allows the victim to see the wrong-doer accept responsibility for his or her actions. Questions asked in the circle are

- What happened?
- How did it happen?
- Who was affected?
- What harm resulted?
- What needs to be done to make things right?

Questions we do not ask are

- Why did you do it?
- What were you thinking?

The students can never answer these questions appropriately, and they just put students on the defensive.

**STEP 8: USE CULTURALLY RELEVANT LEARNING MATERIALS**

First Nations, Métis, and Inuit students feel more welcome and therefore are more likely to be engaged in the classroom when they see their culture and heritage prominently displayed in the room. This is important for primary, junior, and intermediate classes.