

# WALKING TOGETHER

First Nations, Métis and Inuit Perspectives in Curriculum

## Well-being The Sacred Circle

Excerpt from *Education Is Our Buffalo*

Government of Alberta ■





## THE SACRED CIRCLE

Excerpt from *Education Is Our Buffalo*

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### THE SACRED CIRCLE

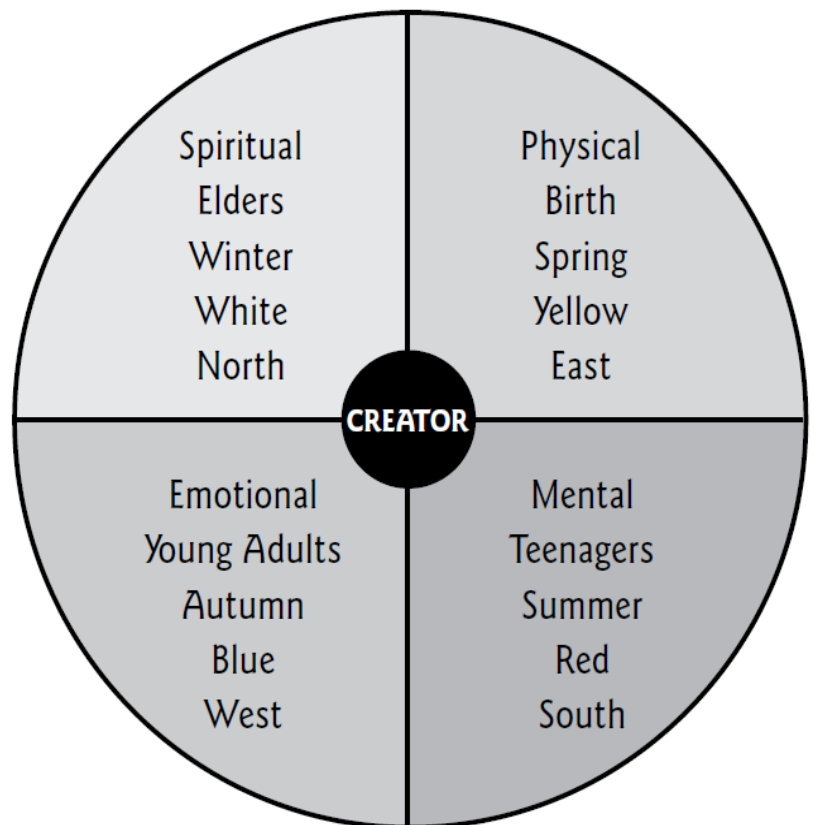
The circle is a universal symbol of connection, unity, harmony, wholeness and eternity. In a circle all parts are equal (Kainai Board of Education et al 2005, 87). The circle is an important symbol, because the First Nations' belief system holds that everything is circular. Life is circular—a person is born, grows into childhood, matures and becomes old, at which point thoughts and actions become childlike again. The seasons are cyclical. Earth moves in a circle. Everything moves in a circle, from the rising sun to the setting sun, from the east and back to the east. The day is divided into four segments of time: sunrise, noon, sunset and night.

The circle also symbolizes inclusion and equality. In traditional First Nations meetings or gatherings, everyone sits in a circle in accordance with the belief that all people are equal. This symbol is drawn on teepees, woven into clothing and made into ornamental parts of one's national dress. The circle is also the basis of many beautiful works of jewellery and art, which are precious possessions.

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### The Medicine Wheel



—Francis Whiskeyjack  
Saddle Lake, Alberta

The circle teaches that four elements—mental, spiritual, emotional, and physical—are distinctive and powerful yet interconnected components of a balanced human life. Each of the four elements represents a particular way of perceiving things, but none is considered superior to or more

### The Sacred Circle

When the Creator put us on this Earth, he gave us four gifts to help us through troubled times. The first was the gift of prayer; the second was the gift of sharing; the third gift was the gift of crying to wash away the pain and the fourth was laughter. If you are able to do these four things, it is said that you are on a healing journey.

significant than the others, and all are to be equally respected. The emphasis is always placed on the need to seek and explore the four great ways in order to gain a thorough understanding of one's own nature in relation to the surrounding world. Today, these four elements are often expressed in the medicine wheel, which has been adopted by many First Nations people regardless of whether it is part of their traditional culture. Just as the acorn carries within it the potential to become a mighty oak tree, the four aspects of our nature (physical, mental, emotional and spiritual) are like seeds that have the potential to grow into powerful gifts (Alberta Education 2005, 87).

Other aspects of life can be symbolized using the circle or medicine wheel. For example, the four symbolic races (red, white, yellow and black) express the idea that we are all part of the same human family. All are brothers and sisters living on the same Mother Earth. The four stages of life—infancy, youth, maturity and old age—relate to a person's life cycle. Each part of the life cycle is characterized by celebrations and rituals. There are many variations in the ways this basic concept is expressed: the four directions, the four winds, the four sacred plants and other relationships that can be expressed in sets of four.



Among the First Nations groups in Canada, the four sacred plants—tobacco, sage, sweetgrass and cedar—are used in sacred ceremonies to help participants enter them with a good heart. These herbs are usually burned, and people carry out ritual actions using the smoke to cleanse their bodies and spirits. In the sweetgrass ceremony, also called a smudge, sweetgrass is used to symbolically cleanse the body and important objects. During pipe ceremonies where tobacco is offered, the smoke represents one’s visible thought; tobacco travels ahead of the words so that honesty will be received in a kind and respectful way (Kainai Board of Education et al 2005, 93).

Tobacco can be used as a gift, in ceremonies, in prayer and as a medicine (commercial tobacco should not be used as medicine because it contains harmful chemicals). Tobacco was never meant to be used as it is today, smoked indiscriminately to the detriment of one’s health. When people want advice from an elder or prayers said on their behalf, they should first offer the elder tobacco.

Interpretations of the circle or medicine wheel vary greatly among First Nations groups. To learn more about how the circle or medicine wheel is represented and interpreted in your area, consult local elders.