

# Where Culture Meets Community: Reclaiming Indigenous Understandings of Neurodiversity in the Classroom

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# Nitsihkâson (Positionality)

- Father to four sons and a daughter, two of my sons are Autistic
- My kinship ties are through the Cutknife, Lightning, and Bruno families
- Nihkawîy (Deborah Cutknife) and nôhkomak (Armine Cutknife and Mariah Lightning) all attended residential schools
- Conducting research in Maskwacîs for 10 years



# Maskwacîs – Bear Hills

- Formerly known as Hobbema
- Located on Treaty 6 territory, an hour south of Edmonton in the province of Alberta
- Nêhiyaw (Plains Cree) community



# Nêhiyaw Understandings of Neurodiversity



# Nêhiyaw Awâsisak (Plains Cree Children)

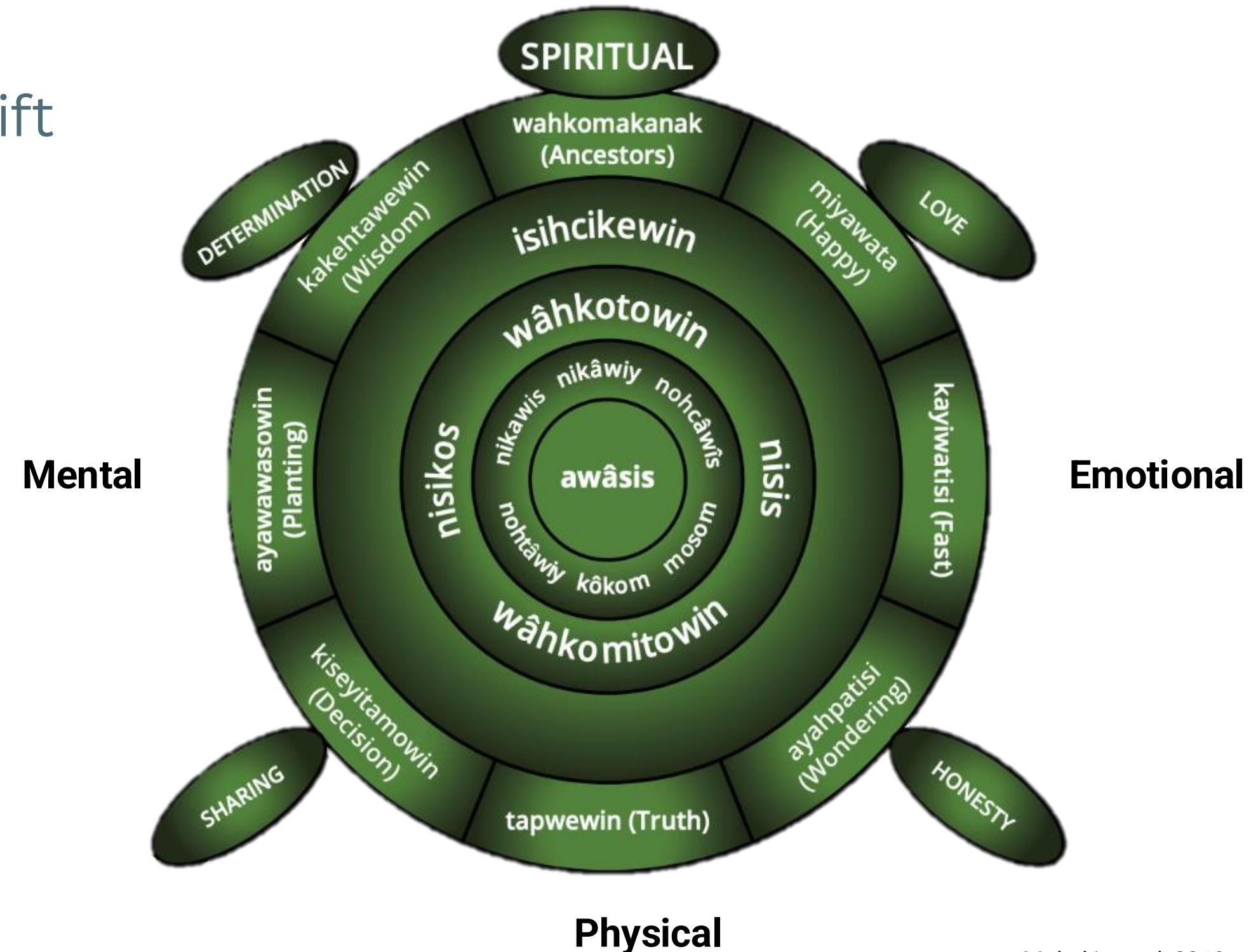
Children are on loan to us, and are a gift from the Creator

Awâsis

“a small animate being,” “a small travelling spirit,” or “a small spirit engaged on a human journey.”

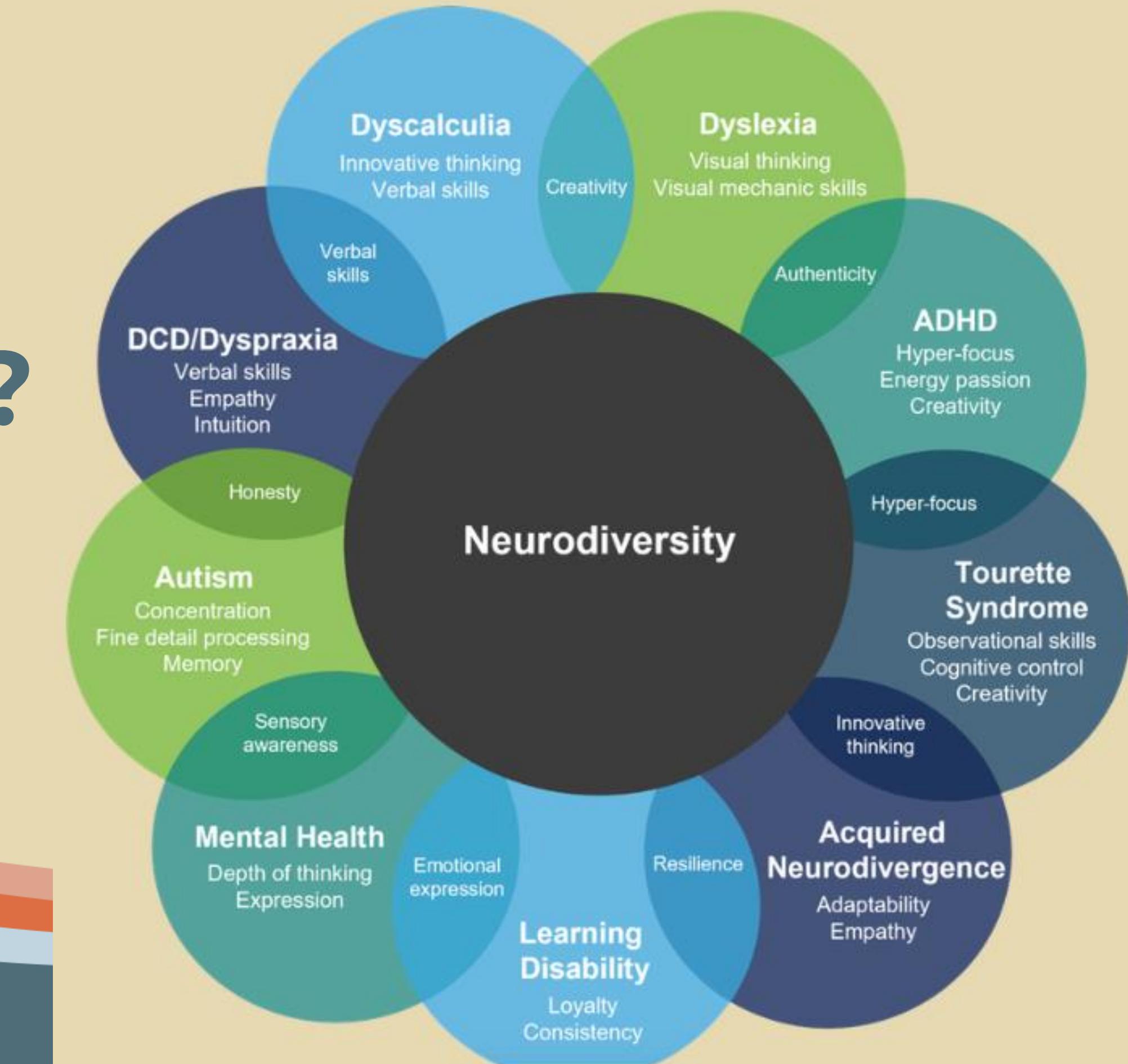


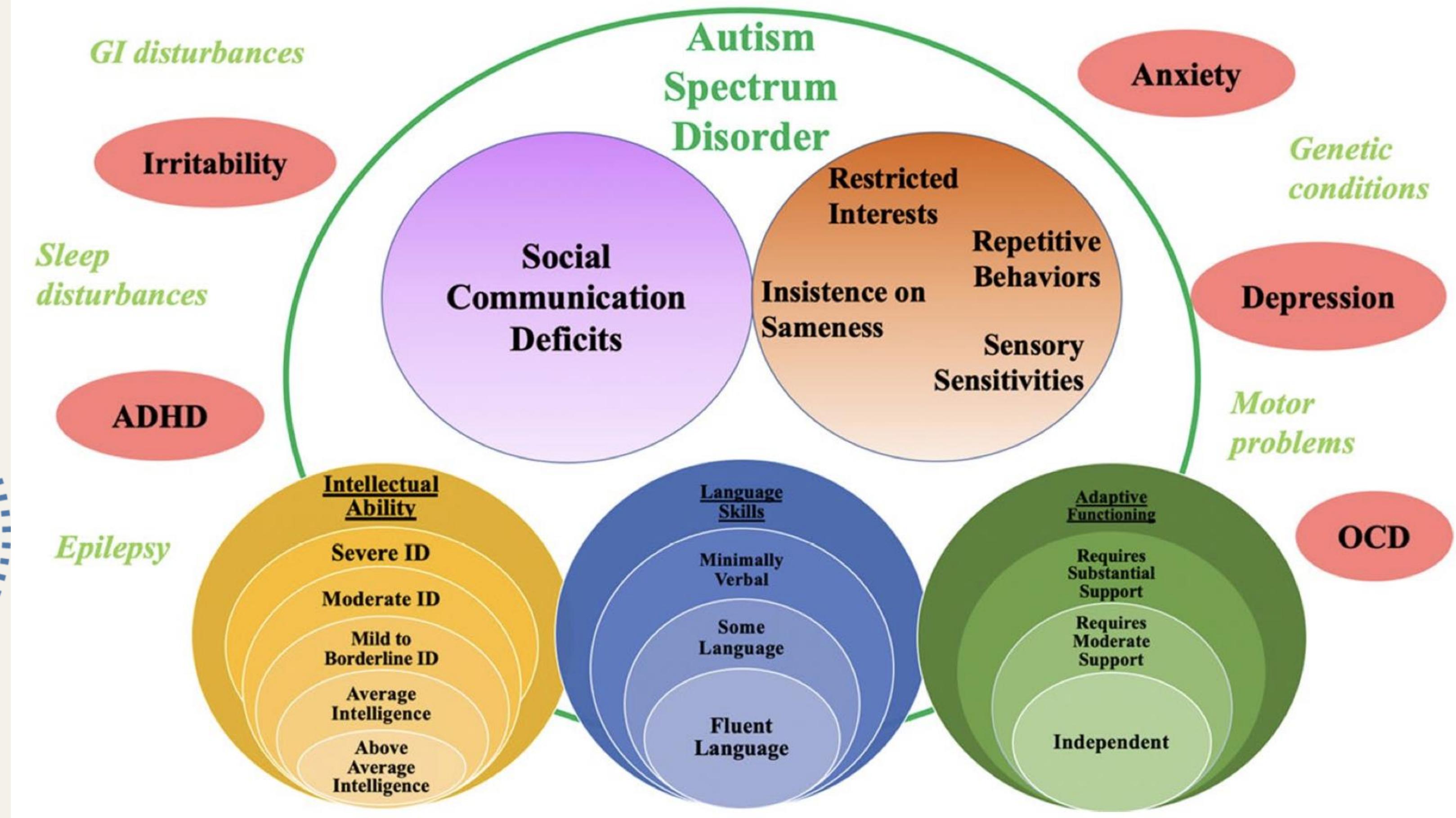
Turtle Lodge Relationship Mapping Image





# What is neurodivergence?



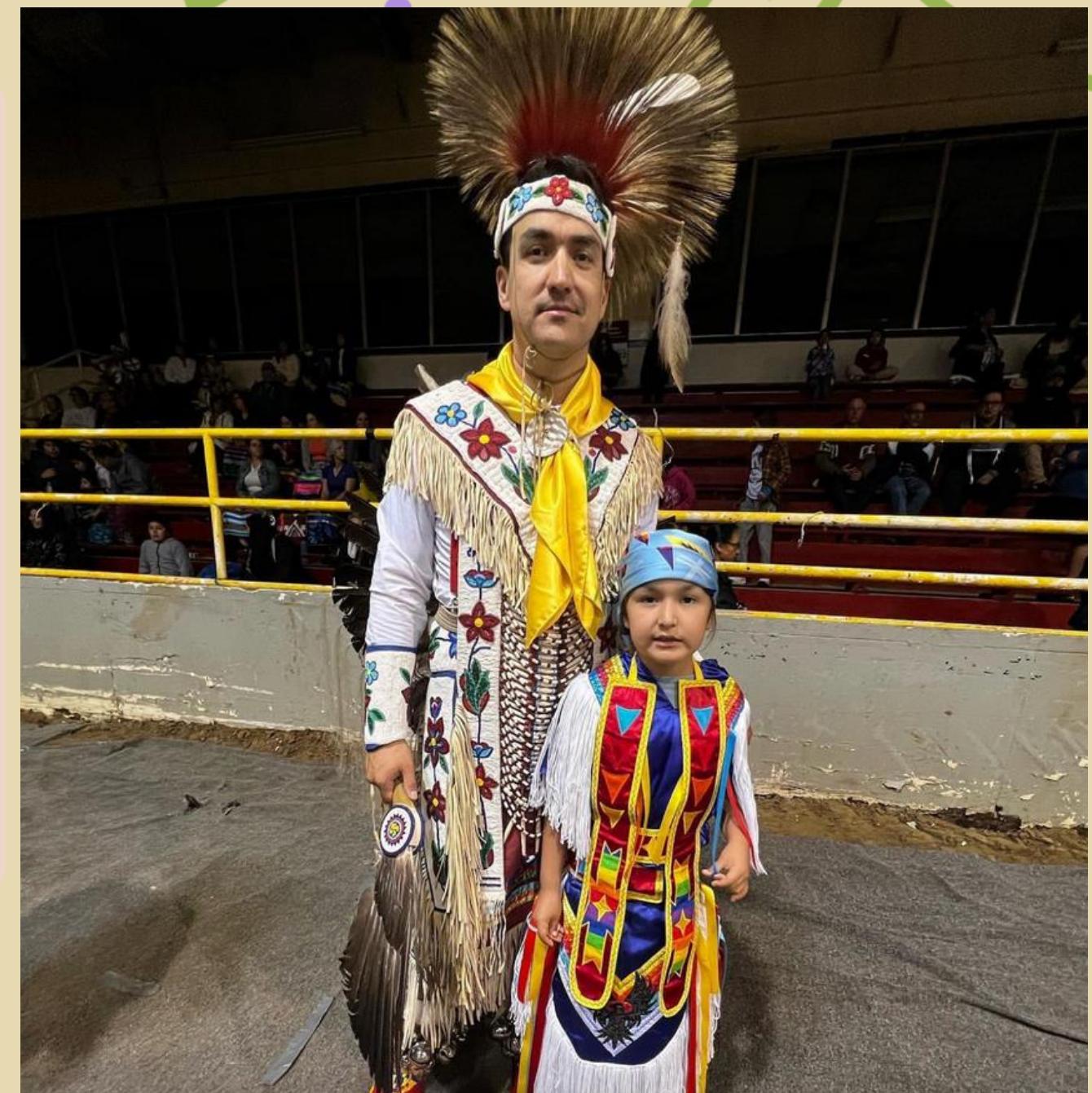


# Nêhiyaw (Plains Cree) Understandings of Autism

**acahk pimatsiwin: a spiritual way of life**

**ê-mihkosit pihtos ê-si-waskawiht: given the gift  
of moving and being different**

**kisewâtsiwak: they are kind and loving or sacred**



# Colonial Disruption & Barriers



# Indigenous deficit discourse

“Deficit-based research can contribute to stigmatization when problematic health issues are repeatedly characterized in the context of a specific population. Additionally, when any given health deficit is repetitively associated with **Indigenous Peoples** through research, there is a risk of stereotyping. Unfortunately, due to a lack of critical exposure in education and media, deficit-based research given without proper framing can perpetuate negative characterizations of **Indigenous Peoples**”

- (Hyett et al, 2018)

# Autism deficit discourse

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# Indigenous Experiences with Education

Indigenous families have historically and currently face systemic challenges when accessing education,

- Residential schools (TRC, 2016)
- Jurisdiction challenges (Fryer, 2019)
- Lack of equitable funding (Manyfingers, (2010)

These negative experiences are still being felt today

# Systemic Discrimination in Accessing Disability Services and Supports

Indigenous families often face:

- Misdiagnosis or delayed diagnosis (Lindblom, 2014)
- System navigation challenges (Antony , 2022)
- Services that feel unsafe or dismissive (Bruno et al 2024)

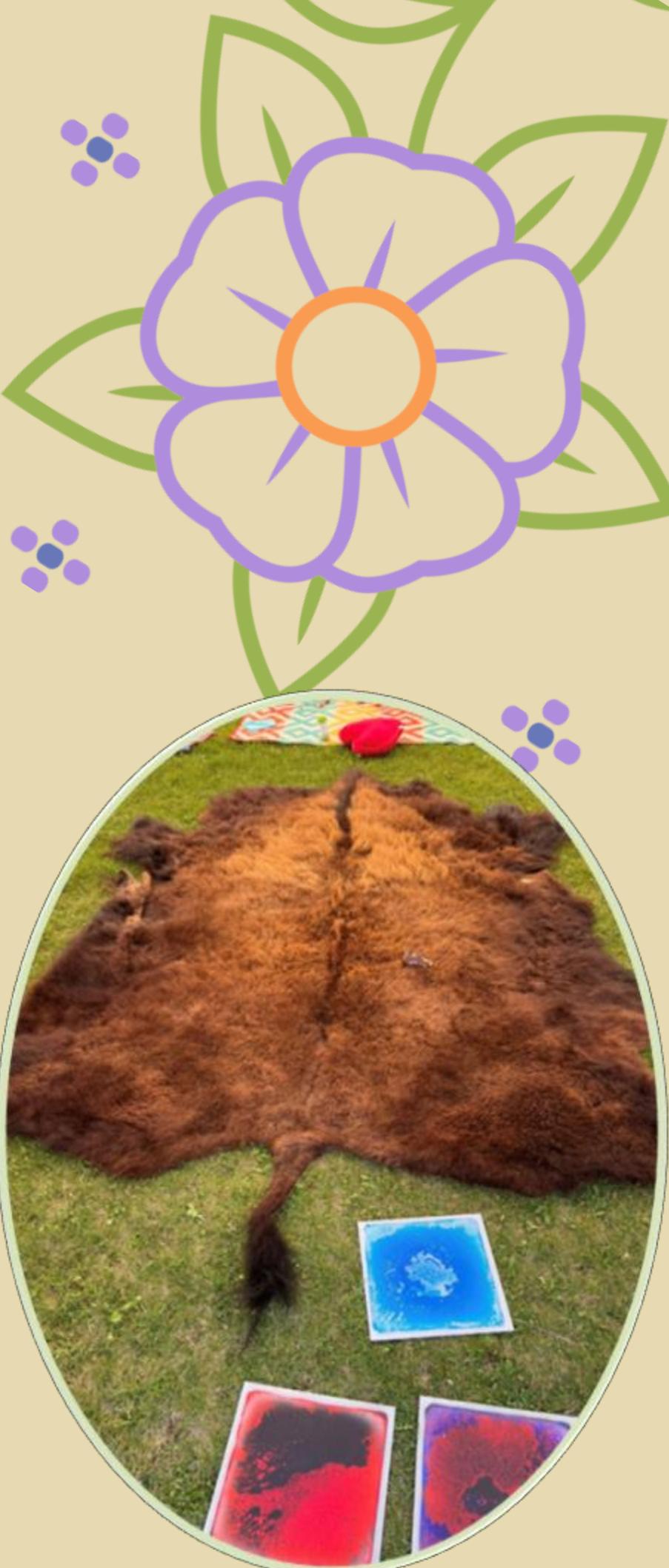
These barriers diminish trust, and create systemic harm

# Education, Culture and Community



# Placing Classroom Inclusion within a Broader Autism Context

- Autistic identity develops across home, school, and community environments, not within classrooms alone (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Goodley, 2014).
- Education systems influence long-term access to belonging, participation, and opportunity for Autistic people (Pellicano et al., 2014).
- Inclusion must be understood as a lived experience shaped by social and relational contexts, not solely by educational placement (Goodley, 2014).



# Autism in Classrooms

- Inclusion is a stated policy goal in Canada, but implementation and lived experiences vary widely across schools and regions (Bennett et al., 2008; Lindsay et al., 2014).
- Families often navigate complex school systems alongside cultural expectations and institutional norms (Lindsay et al., 2014).
- Indigenous neurodivergent children experience additional layers of misunderstanding due to colonial legacies and systemic inequities in education (Ball & Janyst, 2008; TRC, 2015).



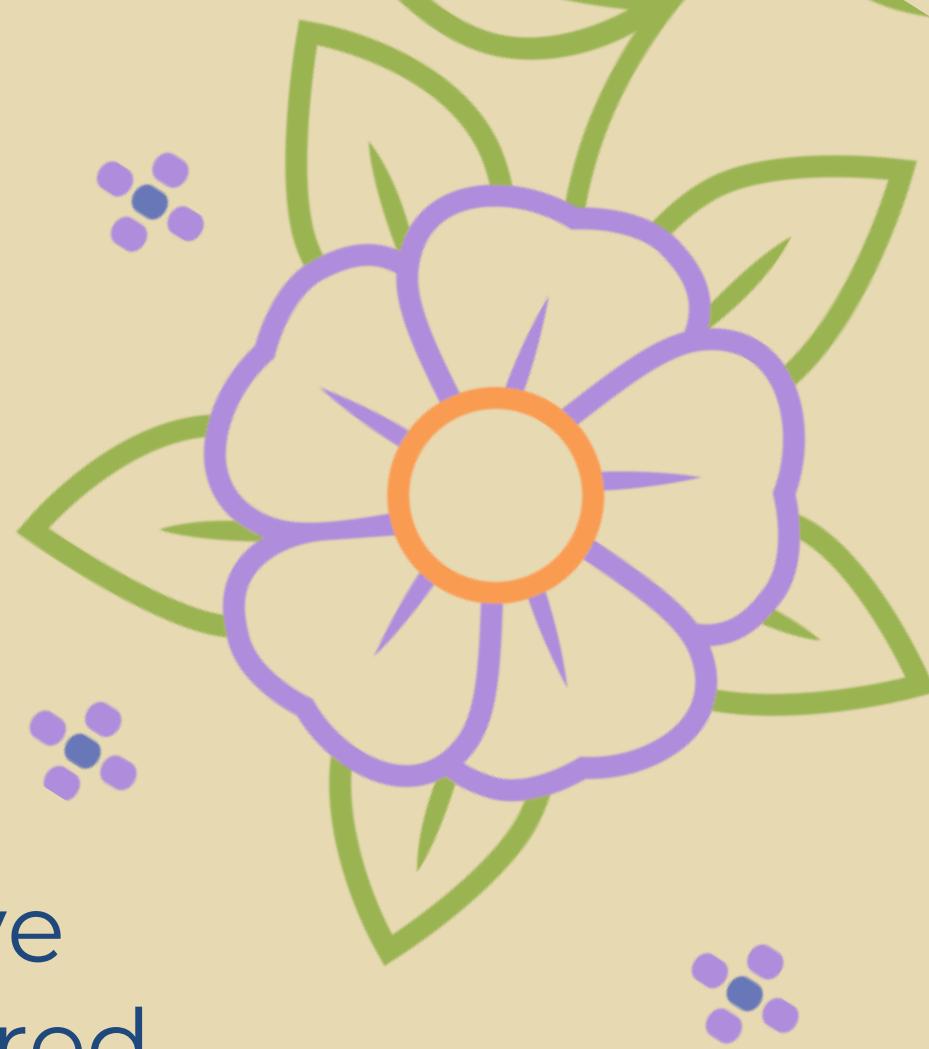
# Culture as a Lens for Neurodiversity

- Culture shapes how difference and disability is understood and valued (Whyte, 1995)
- Indigenous frameworks centre community, land, and relationships (Battiste, 2013; Kovach, 2009).
- Classrooms benefit when multiple worldviews are recognized as valid ways of knowing and learning (Castagno & Brayboy, 2008).



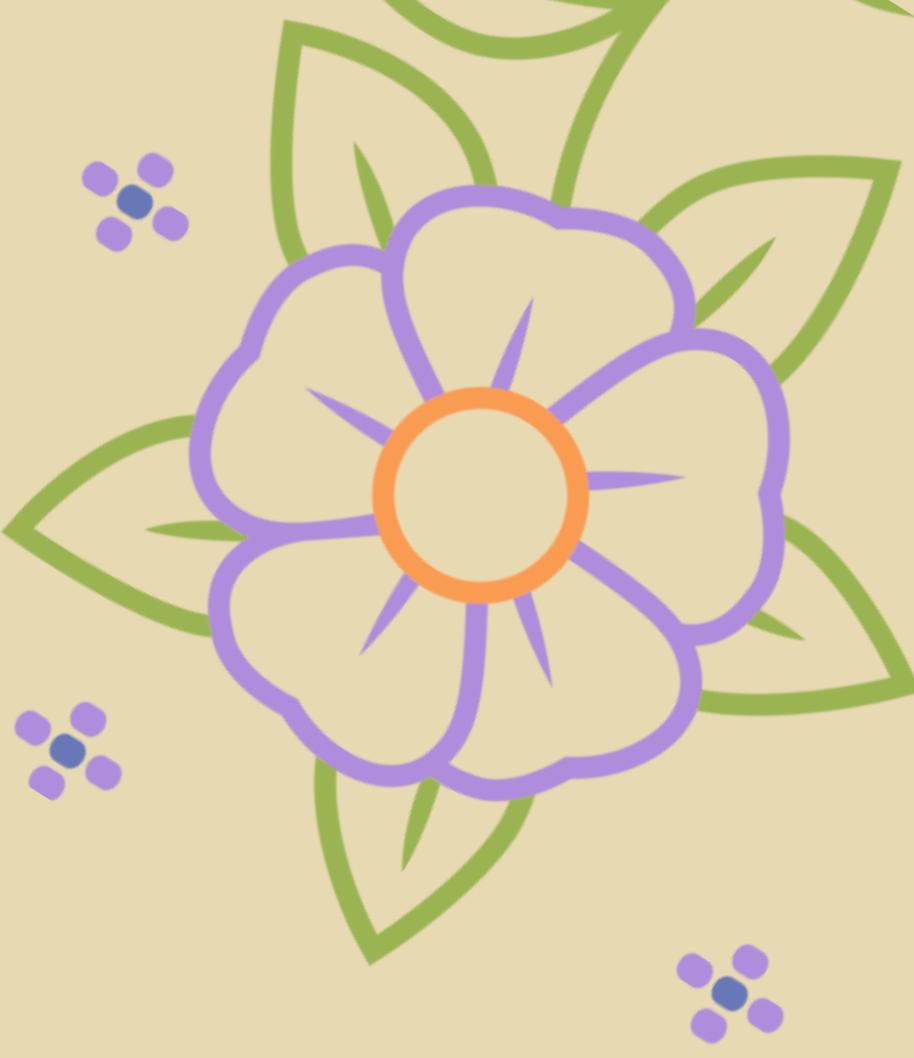
# Classroom Supports That Reflect Community Knowledge

- Strategies from my own experience
  - Parent–school communication tools are more effective when co-designed with families and grounded in shared understanding (Auerbach, 2012).
  - Open communication and shared documentation (journals, Google Docs) for consistency.
  - Classroom routines co-created with children and caregivers (Amevordzie, 2025)



# What Schools Can Do to Support Indigenous Neurodivergent Learners

- Honour family knowledge as an expert resource.
- Broadening definitions of learning success supports Indigenous and neurodivergent ways of knowing and being (Battiste, 2013; TRC, 2015).
- Build relationships, wâhkôtowin, over compliance.
- Embed cultural safety in routines and environments.



# Reframing Support as Strength-Based and Relational

- Support enables participation, not dependence
- Interdependence is a strength
- Belonging and relational connection are central determinants of wellbeing for autistic individuals (Milton & Sims, 2016).



# The Role of Community in Classroom Inclusion



- Cultural mentorship supports identity formation.
- Families and communities shape educational engagement.
- Schools benefit when Indigenous voices guide decision-making and educational practices (FNIGC, 2014; Tuck, 2009).

# Where community meets inclusion

## Pow wows can be overwhelming

- Loud drumming and singing
- Hot
- Lots of people





# Indigenous Led Autism Research

## Indigenous Community Participation and Sensory Environments Study

- Background: Minimal understandings of sensory experiences of Indigenous families
- Mixed Methods
  - Parent Sensory Experiences Questionnaire - Community (PSEQ-C) and semi structured interviews
- Preliminary results.
  - Cultural activities were viewed as more sensory friendly than community activities



# Practical Steps Going Forward



# Where Culture Meets Community

- An Understanding of Culturally Responsive Classrooms
  - Culture and learning are inseparable
  - Community knowledge enriches educational practice
  - Inclusion is an ongoing, relational process – wâhkôtowin (Kovach & Montgomery, 2015)
  - Neuro-affirming classroom practices
  - Prioritize safety



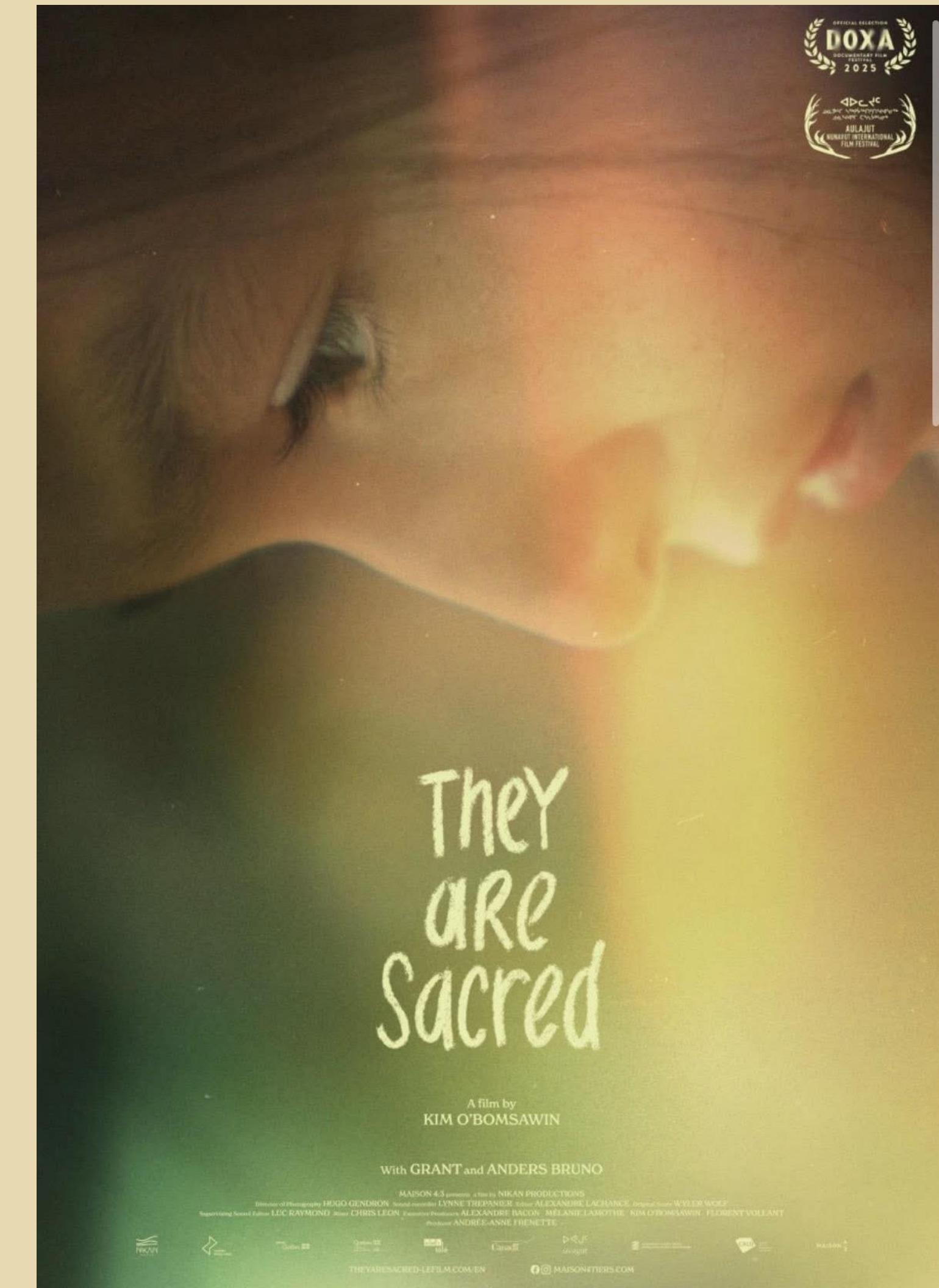


# “Sewâtsiwin: They Are Sacred”

## Documentary (rent/buy).



Scan me!



# Ninaskômowin (thank you)

## Questions?

