

Name: Anne Lindblom & Grant Bruno

Title and institution: University of Innland Norway & University of Alberta, Canada

E-mail: anne.lindbom@inn.no

Braiding Knowledges in Special Education and Health Services for Indigenous Autistic Children and Youth

Short description / Abstract:

There is a significant lack of research centring the experiences of Indigenous autistic children and youth and their families, even as calls grow to understand autism and neurodiversity in culturally grounded ways. Western biomedical and psychological approaches often frame autism through a deficit lens, risking the pathologization or erasure of Indigenous knowledge, languages, and relational understandings of disability and wellbeing. This can obscure strengths rooted in kinship, community responsibility, land-based practices, and spirituality, while contributing to barriers in accessing assessment, diagnosis, and appropriate support.

This presentation examines what becomes possible when we shift from deficit-based framings to difference- and strengths-based approaches that honour autistic ways of being as valid expressions of diverse Indigenous identities. Framed as braiding knowledges, we explore how Indigenizing autism diagnostic procedures can address cultural bias in assessment tools, linguistic and communicative diversity, jurisdictional gaps, and historical mistrust of institutions through the leadership of families, communities, Knowledge Keepers, and autistic Indigenous self-advocates. We also consider how special education policies and practices can be transformed to affirm multiple identities, reflect Indigenous pedagogies and land based learning, and accommodate sensory, communication, and learning differences. Drawing from Canadian First Nations and Sámi standpoints, we highlight community-driven initiatives that braid Indigenous and Western knowledge in health and education systems, advancing culturally safe, relational, and self-determined services for Indigenous autistic children, youth, and their families