THRIVIVAL: THE FIRE WITHIN

FORMING STRONG CULTURAL IDENTITIES IN AN INTERSECTING SPACE OF INDIGENEITY AND AUTISM | BCCAMPUS RESEARCH FELLOWS 2021-2022

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BRITISH COLUMBIA

OFFICE OF INDIGENIZATION

The Justice Institute of British Columbia
respectfully acknowledges the Traditional, unceded and
Treaty Territories of First Peoples its campuses are situated.

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Introduction

Weyt-k Hello.

Kukwstéc-kucw. On behalf of our research team and participants, we thank you for tuning in and listening to *Thrivival: The Fire Within*, a special presentation created as a part of a BCcampus Research Fellows Project held in 2022. I will share more about this amazing project but first would like to introduce and situate myself as well express gratitude and recognition for the many important people who have made this project possible and a success.

My name is Heather Simpson. I am Secwepemc, Interior Salish from the Stswecem'c Xgat'tem First Nation, which translates into Canoe Creek Dog Creek, situated in what is referred to as the Caribou or Central Interior of what today is called British Columbia Canada. I am descendent from the First River and Plateau Peoples of these lands and of mixed European heritage. Today I join you from the unceded stolen Traditional Territories of Musqueam, Qayqayt and Coast Salish Peoples. I am a guest visitor on these Territories and so respectfully acknowledge my place, role, and responsibilities to be here in a good way and commit to daily actions in pursuit of justice, Truth, and Reconciliation so that First Peoples here and everywhere across Turtle Island, are respected and protected. This project and its Teachings are a reflection of these actions, taken by myself and all relations involved.

Following oral tradition, I will be your storyteller weaving together multiple stories, a bit of my own but mostly the stories gifted to us by our research participants, project Elder, and Indigenous Knowledge Keeper, all who I will respectfully introduce in this presentation.

Heather Simpson is my English given name. I have not yet been given a name in an Indigenous language. I have learned from my cousin, Phyllis Jack-Webstad, that many of our People do not have traditional names in Secwepemctsin as this was one ceremony that was lost for many generations as a direct result of colonization in our community. This is a ceremony that our people need to reclaim and revitalize.

I am the daughter of a Sixties Scoop survivor and granddaughter to multiple generations of grandparents who were forced to attend residential school. Like many Indigenous families across Canada, our family was subjected to generational displacement and disconnection and through acts of denial and social isolation, there was loss of language, culture, and family ties.

A part of my story is one thread of a narrative about the impacts of colonization while another part, about Thrivival. The totality of my lived experiences brought me to this moment to lead this research project and share as an Indigenous Autistic woman, a mother, grandmother, scholar, educator, and activist. By Western standards, I have an accomplished academic and professional life. I have an honours Master of Arts in Leadership degree from Trinity Western University in a Business Specialization Stream that compliments my twenty plus years in human service and education, where I have worked in front line, leadership, and consulting capacities across service delivery models, dedicated to serving marginalized peoples and communities, specifically, Peoples with Disabilities and Indigenous Peoples. Presently, I am the Coordinator for the Office of Indigenization and a sessional Faculty member at the Justice

Institute of British Columbia. I am proud of these achievements and deeply aware that I have succeeded in spaces that are not designed for non-normative groups outside the dominant Euro-Western culture. However, my greatest achievements are not measured by western standards, and with humility and gratitude it is acknowledging the reclamation of my cultural identities in an intersecting space of Indigeneity and autism. I grew up not knowing who I was, where I belonged or who I belonged to. Day by day in this season of my life, I am beginning to.

This journey began with a curiosity of self-identity and longing for a sense of attachment and relationships- a secure sense of being of my place in the world. This quest was further motivated by motherhood, through a process of self-discovery inspired by my children. In learning about their neurodivergence, I learned of my own. Coming home as Secwepemc followed a similar timeline. In 2011, I was claimed by our bloodline relatives and in December 2021, after 40 years, was recognized as a Status member of Stswecem'c Xgat'tem.

Growing up without a secure sense of self-identity and place in the world, intergenerational and complex trauma, and a personal history of wayward behaviours to cope with it all, and now as a mother with lived experience of life in the intersection of Indigeneity

and autism, I know first-hand the level and degree of challenges faced in different arenas including post-secondary education. As a parent to three neurodivergent Indigenous children, two of whom are Autistic, I understand that while there are commonalities in the Indigenous Autistic struggle to navigate systems and societies built according to worldviews, values, and cultures different from one's own, no one Indigenous Autistic story is identical and there is something to learn from each journey.

Context matters and to understand the Indigenous Autistic experience, each individual story needs to be examined in the context of different settings and environments. This impetus paved the way for a BCcampus Research Fellows project as a platform to address this urgent need. Project Elder, Phillip Gladue, who is Métis-Cree and who I will have the privilege of introducing later in this presentation, says we must "create a safer space for Indigenous Autistic students to come out of their shell and through Aboriginal ways of doing, create cultural opportunities so the student can give something to the communities whom they belong to for their own health and healing".

Titled "Forming Strong Cultural Identities in an Intersecting Space of Indigeneity and Autism", our participatory action research project used digital storytelling to weave together individual and collective narratives representing storied experiences of Indigenous Autistic post-secondary students situated in the Lower Mainland of British Columbia. Originally the geographic focus was rural and remote communities. We did not have a response from participants residing outside the Lower Mainland (and that is another story to learn from another day). This project was aimed at addressing the gap of self-determined, culturally-relevant knowledges in teachings and learning literature, specifically in the areas of

Indigenization, decolonization, equity, diversity and inclusion. Indigenous Autistic adult learners have long been ignored, overlooked, devalued, and not prioritized in post-secondary education. This is well documented and supported in academic literature across first-world nations. This finding is also confirmed by the participants in this study. This research is one small but hopefully meaningful step towards improving higher learning outcomes for Indigenous Autistic learners, and arguably all students who are marginalized in the public post-secondary system.

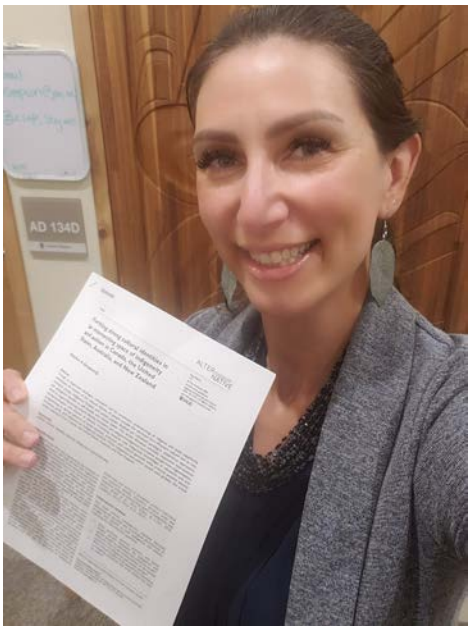
Dedication

Before I go any further, I wish to honour and pay my respects to the late Elder Lillian Howard from the Muchalaht First Nation, dedicating this project to her memory and legacy. Elder Lillian Howard was such a beacon and beloved Matriarch in community who had such a great love, shown through her many efforts of leadership and advocacy. She spent her life as an activist for Indigenous rights and issues that impact our Peoples and community. At the time of her passing, she was a co-chair for advisory committees with the City of Vancouver and the Vancouver Police Department and was the Elder for the Butterflies In-Spirit, a dance group that raises awareness about the issue of MMIWG. Elder Lillian had a decorated career and once told me that attaining her Masters degree from Royal Roads University later in life was among her proudest accomplishments.

The origins of this research idea started back in 2019 through my relationship with Elder Lillian. As an urban Indigenous woman and away from my Secwepemc Elders and relatives, Elder Lillian gifted me with her council and has been instrumental in my healing journey and reconciling my lived experiences as an Indigenous Autistic woman. I am deeply grateful for her maternal guidance and our relationship. In the spirit world, we will continue to champion for change together. Rest in Power Elder Lillian.

Research History

The questions that were raised and the reflections that were motivated through conversations with Elder Lillian, led to my taking up a formal literature review to investigate and better understand and explain the sociological phenomena impacting people identified as both Indigenous and Autistic and identify key factors that would support the strengthening of Indigenous Autistic cultural identities. This review resulted in a journal article titled *Forming Strong Cultural Identities in an Intersecting Space of Indigeneity and Autism in Canada, the United States, Australia, and New Zealand* published in September 2021 in AlterNative: An International Journal of Indigenous Peoples.



This research paper informed the creation of this project to test literature findings, in particular, how Indigenous knowledges in education and arts programming can address prevalent patterns of social injustice, exclusion, and cultural genocide while in the face of this common experience, promote positive identity formation, pride, and resilience for Indigenous Autistics, exploring substantiated theory and practice within the context of public post-secondary education.

Acknowledgements

I would like to acknowledge and recognize individuals and organizations who have supported the journey of this research project. April Haddad, Director of Library Services at the Justice Institute of BC (JIBC). It was April's recommendation and encouragement to apply for research sponsorship through the BCcampus Research Fellows program that inspired testing my previous scholarship in a space of post-secondary education. Thank you to BCcampus for selecting and funding this project and a special mention of Leva Lee, Manager, Learning & Teaching at BCcampus, for her role in stewarding this partnership. It is innovative funds like the BCcampus Research Fellows that invites community voice, leadership, and participation so to be inclusive of wider knowledges and perspectives from which we all must learn and benefit from in our education systems.

I would like to acknowledge and thank Jason La Rochelle, from the Haida Nation, Director of JIBC's Office of Indigenization, for supporting this project as a priority to ensure greater representation for Indigenous Autistic learners in post-secondary and that efforts to live Indigenization, decolonization and practices of Equity, Diversity and Inclusion are led by and realized in collaboration with Indigenous Autistic learners.

I share warmest gratitude and acknowledgement of Dave Smulders and Stephen O-Hearn with JIBC's Centre for Teaching, Learning, and Innovation for helping share this oral presentation.

It is with utmost gratitude and respect that I acknowledge and recognize our research team, comprised of two Indigenous Autistic participants, representing Métis and First Nations and whom attend full-time, different post-secondary's located within British Columbia's Lower Mainland region, our project Elder, JIBC Resident Elder Phillip Gladue, from the Métis Nation, Knowledge Keeper Dr. Aaron Johannes, from the Métis Nation and Wendy Parry, an Autistic Post-Secondary Educator with European-Settler heritage. Each member made vital contributions, each with a unique role and responsibilities and brought together, created something our ancestors would be proud of. We practiced our ways, spoke our languages, included all perspectives with respect and hospitality, and shared our gifts for the betterment of our work, each other, and the many relations that will be touched by this work. The purpose of this project is to inform educators and policy makers ways to do the work of Indigenization, decolonization, and equity, diversity, and inclusion. I raise my hands to you for living our ways as an example. Your leadership plants the seeds for future generations to benefit from needed change.

Elder Phillip Gladue's Views On This Work

To speak more about the significance of this work, I would like to respectfully share a reflective statement expressed by project Elder Phillip Gladue:

ᑕᓂᔨ (Tanisi/Hello),

ᓂᔨᐦᑳᓵ/Nisihkason/My name is Phillip Gladue and I am a Métis-Cree Elder. ᐅᒋ ᓂᓴ/oci niya/ I am from High Prairie, Alberta, raised in the traditional way. I am a Cree Language Carrier, Knowledge Keeper, and currently work as a Resident Elder for the Justice Institute of British Columbia and for public school districts and various governance boards in Central Coast Salish Territories. I also sit in the Senate with Métis Nation BC.

I have worked in the B.C. public school system from kindergarten to higher education for many years. During this time, I have yet to see a research project like the one that we are proposing today. It is a first of its kind. What I have seen, are students from the earliest of ages, who are Autistic or living with other disabilities and as well Indigenous students, being marginalized and who carry the effects of systemic racism throughout their lives.

This research is meant to break this history for students who are Autistic and Indigenous. Too often marginalized students bear the negative consequences from the lack of meaningful cultural supports and relationships. As you well know, some end up involved with

gangs, find belonging on the streets, end up in jail or tragically, or lose their lives. This research is to help create a safer space for Indigenous Autistic students to come out of their shell and through Aboriginal ways of doing, create cultural opportunities so the student can give something to the communities whom they belong to for their own health and healing.

We have so much to learn from these students. We also have so much to learn from you. We hope to learn from your Nation's perspective about what your community is going through in supporting these young people to live their fullest potential. We hope you join us in the beginning steps of a research project that will look to learn from Indigenous Autistic students and respective Nations, so that we can help B.C.'s educators with tools and knowledges that are self-determined and self-created by Indigenous People for Indigenous People and will benefit all people. To make real change in our communities, there is no other way.

ᑭᑎᐚᒼ ᐊᓯᒥᓇ ᑳᐚᐸᒥᑎᐣ/Kitiwam asimina kawapamitan/ I will see you again.

All My Relations,

Elder Phillip Gladue

Research Done In A Good Way

As Elder Phil expressed, this research centers Indigenous Autistic learners and supports them to create self-determined actions towards transforming their educational experience. This is not pan-research, and we acknowledge that the participants do not represent the whole of Indigenous Autistic experiences. That said, the storied experiences shared are crucial to filling a gap in much needed information to improve educational experiences and outcomes for student body that is often relegated to the margins in post-secondary and society in general.

Before we finalized the scope and focus of this project, our research team followed protocol and extended an invitation to the First Nations of whose lands partnering Post-Secondary Institutes are located. This included Sḵwx̱wú7mesh (Squamish) xʷməθkʷəy̓əm (Musqueam), qiqéyt (Qayqayt) and səl̓ilw̓ətaʔɬ (Tsleil-Waututh) Nations. We invited Nations to be involved and compensated in this research project from its inception so that the direction and outputs can directly benefit and fit with the needs and interests of the respective Nations. Before sharing my words today, these respective Nations received our research findings and this presentation to ensure mutuality in the sharing of reported information.

This research was guided by an ethical framework transparently shared with all esteemed partners. It is situated in a knowing that the Canadian public post-secondary system was created and is maintained, as a living manifestation of the colonial project; that is a country that has been built and evolves on the disadvantage spiritually, socially, politically, economically, and environmentally, of its First Peoples. To Indigenize and decolonize Westernized educational institutions we must acknowledge that the public post-secondary

institutions and by extension the system it operates within, fundamental purpose is to uphold various colonial ideals and processes based on discriminatory, capitalistic, and imperialistic motives. It is with this understanding, we can shed further light on the dominating ecosystem existing at institutional and individual levels that operate to make invisible or erase, intellectual traditions, discourses, and practices different from the foremost Euro-Western ways in education.

The denial of multiple worldviews, ethics, and values in education prevents any real progress to achieving greater equity, diversity, and inclusion in B.C. post-secondary in general and in a teaching and learning context. It also prevents institutions (in this case public post-secondary) from meeting its responsibility to build a school ecosystem not on singular Truth but multiple Truths so that all students, staff, and faculty are respectfully served. To assert the necessity and value of Indigenous-Autistic perspective in the development and transformation of education and educational practices, we used a participatory action research (PAR) design.

We addressed the issues of exclusion and systemic oppression by supporting the leadership and collaboration of Indigenous Autistic students to identify gaps and inform educators and administration who make policy decisions, as to what is needed in post-secondary teaching and learning and in policy, to better support the identity and further the success of Indigenous Autistic students. As a PAR project, deliverables were determined by Indigenous Autistic students and addressed the gap of self-determined, culturally-relevant, knowledge in teachings and learning literature with the aim to lessen the ongoing oppression harmful to self-identity and individual and public health of Indigenous Peoples and Autistic Peoples.

We chose a PAR model to conceptualize, design, test, and evaluate, a culturally-responsive education and arts intervention for teaching and learning purposes. The model honours Indigenous knowledges, and affords collaboration with Indigenous and Autistic Peoples, with Elders, and with advocates. PAR aligns with teachings I have received from my Elders related to community-building, social justice, equity, and Indigenous ways of living. It is also a model that aligns with values and perspectives exemplified in The Truth and Reconciliation Commission's (2015) *Calls to Action* and the province of British Columbia's *Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples Act* (2019) and its design features are endorsed by the evidence-base of my previous literature review. For example, healthy cultural identity formation embodies the idea that each member is an important part of the larger whole and their presence, perspective, and lived experience is as valid and meaningful as it is necessary, in shaping both individual and collective cultural identity. Moreover, it is critical to the integrity and authenticity of this research, that Indigenous Autistic voices and citizenship be present, represented, and fully articulated, and power, control, and ownership of research and the research process, shared. The PAR research model upholds integral principles and concepts essential to ethics, efficacy, and appropriateness required in this area of research such as the protection of human rights and dignity, self-determination and sovereignty, and concepts of shared power, accessibility, and holism.

The research problem described originally was limited by my perspective and

scholarship. By design, PAR involves Participants in the research process from conceptualization, so that there is a comprehensive understanding of localized social problems that inspire self-directed actions for change. Our research problem was built upon by research participants and research questions developed reflected a shared vision of the refined research problem.

Research Framework & Questions

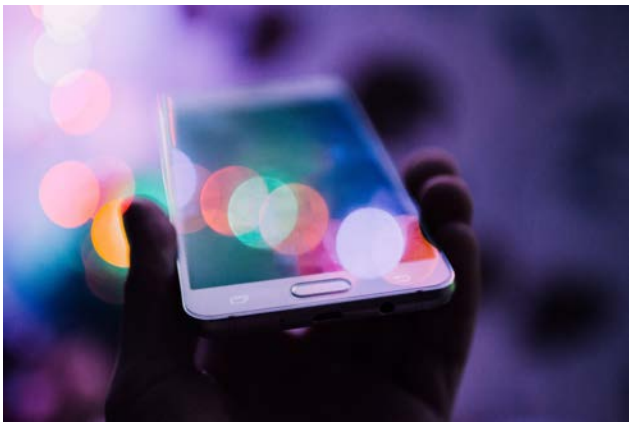
Research shows that the absence of culturally-responsive services and supports for Indigenous and Autistics peoples in educational and disability services spaces is correlated to negative social outcomes in holistic individual and public health and in the field of education (Tan, 2018; Sullivan, 2013; Graham, 2012). As a potential way to address the research problem as its presented in current scholarly literature and understood from my perspective, I recommended the following main research question as our starting point: *How might B.C. post-secondary teaching and learning practices and policy better integrate Indigenous knowledges in education and arts programming to disrupt patterns of social injustice, exclusion, and cultural genocide while promoting positive identity formation, pride, and resilience for Indigenous Autistics?* Additional research questions were developed by participants following a mind-mapping exercise to identify key topics to explore, referring to a modified inquiry framework based upon Thompson Rivers University's (2010) *Aboriginal Education Framework*. This mapping exercise was followed by a collaborative consensus approach among participants to vote on key topics, narrowing to and selecting one topic reflective of the modified inquiry framework to guide the development of a co-created research question within each area of the framework.

The modified inquiry framework depicts four quadrants representing significant areas to explore to better understand and plan for Indigenous student educational experience; History & Traditions, Services & Supports, Transformational Educational Practices, and Collective Good and Critical Hope. In the center of the framework is a fire, representing Student Self-

Knowledge. The fire is symbolic of the inherent natural capacity within students and the transformational power they possess. In addition to the original research question, in the realm of Self-Knowledge, the participants asked *What stressors and barriers do learners experience in post-secondary environments and what strategies do you use to overcome obstacles for greater success and sense of purpose in post-secondary?* For History & Traditions, *How do learners in post-secondary access cultural history, knowledge's, and practices to support strengthening cultural identity in the context of ongoing colonization in education and society?* In Services and Supports, participants asked *How does a post-secondary institution provide equity-deserving learners the services and supports to meet learner goals and align with coursework and desired outcomes?* In Transformational Education Practices, *What teaching and learning practices do you recommend for creating safer, equitable, inclusive learning environments for Indigenous Autistic students?* And to ensure a focus beyond self, a fundamental ethic across various Indigenous worldviews, for Collective Good and Critical Hope, participants asked *How do we create a future in post-secondary education that offers hope and promise to Indigenous Autistic students?*

Research Methodology

To conduct this research, we used digital storytelling, a participatory audio and visual method of research that is credited in academic literature as being both more culturally-relevant to Indigenous Peoples (Hanemaayer et al., 2020; Genuis, Willows & Jardine, 2015; Freeman et al., 2020) as it "a powerful means for promoting community dialogue and creating opportunities for individual and community change"(Wang & Burris, 1997, as cited in Genuis, Willows & Jardine, 2015, p. 602) and is a method of research that shows greater efficacy in helping Autistic participants "voice their perspective" (Winstone et al., 2014, p. 190). Arguably, digital storytelling as methodology also challenges the Euro-Western intellectual tradition that values and prioritizes written knowledge representation and instead, promotes Indigenous oral tradition, storytelling, and symbolism as valid purveyors of systems and representations of knowledges.



There is no one approach to digital storytelling and published research using digital storytelling is expanding, which provided a solid evidence-base for this project (Hanemaayer et al., 2020; Genuis, Willows & Jardine, 2015; Freeman et al., 2020; Hyman et al, 2020; Ward & de Leeuw, 2018). Photovoice is an example methodology utilized by Hanemaayer et al. (2020) and Genuis, Willows & Jardine (2015) in studies conducted in Indigenous communities to explore perspectives on traditional foods. Photovoice is

described as “a process in which people – usually those with limited power due to poverty, language barriers, race, class, ethnicity, gender, culture, or other circumstances – use video and/or photo images to capture aspects of their environment and experiences and share them with others” (Community Tool Box, 2021, para. 2). In Freeman et al. (2020), researchers working with “Nak’azdli Whut’en, a First Nations community in northern British Columbia” utilized a video-based methodology called WeVideo technology, piloting an intergenerational digital storytelling platform with Elders and students to “co-create digital stories to create a cultural legacy for future generations” (p. 284).

Instead of selecting a specific technology like Photovoice (Hanemaayer et al., 2020; Genuis, Willows & Jardine, 2015) or WeVideo (Freeman et al., 2020), we invited participants to share digital stories that consisted of choice content that might include photographs and other images, video and audio recordings, artwork, and/ or songs and music, into a private individual and secured Canadian-housed digital drop-box, Sync.com, shared between the participant and myself. Each digital story submitted explored research questions in ways unique, meaningful, and relevant to the participant. Both students opted to share digital stories using Microsoft PowerPoint though each participant presented stories in different ways. One participant balanced written and symbolic representations on separate slides and provided an oral explanation of the submission during a recorded live session. Another participant chose to use the voice over function to narrate their story in a series of slides. The slides included additional written explanations in the English language that summarized the oral narration provided. This student also opted to share a document file that contained additional responses to the research questions, augmenting the submitted digital story.

All engagement in this research was compensated following a project budget and the research process itself was conducted over eight weeks. Sessions ranged between one and two hours in length, were a mix of individual and group sessions and all were conducted online using Microsoft Teams. Sessions included Elder support and Teachings, ceremony and practice of various protocol such as land acknowledgements, and introduction and sharing circles. Each session was process and outcome focused and promoted reciprocal knowledge transfer and dialogue. To learn about and be supported to create digital stories, two sessions, sessions five and six, were facilitated by Knowledge Keeper and post-secondary educator, Dr. Aaron Johannes. Dr. Johannes is a professional and natural storyteller who operates *Imagine a Circle Collective* which leads training, curriculum development, workshops and other community-based projects that support the needs and wellbeing of people with disabilities. Dr. Johannes is a skilled graphic artist and facilitator and provided participants with the Teachings and tools to assist them in creating and telling their stories. Elder Phillip Gladue personalized sessions by providing participants encouragement while sharing his lived experiences and Teachings on all topics introduced and explored to provide an Indigenous perspective that participants learn from and could draw upon for this project and in general.

Participants were introduced to various ways of approaching digital storytelling and creating digital stories including variations of storyboards and planning processes. Elder Phil shared Medicine Wheel Teachings and guided participants in referring to these Teachings to help them develop stories that were culturally relevant as well as holistic and individualized. Digital stories were developed over the course of session five through eight. This research is based on individual participant case studies however data collected has been analyzed and

interpreted both individually and collectively, not as a comparative between participants but to identify emergent themes in response to research questions and the development of a collective narrative. Recordings from sessions and digital stories were transcribed and coded in NVivo and data was analyzed for emergent themes and findings. A participant evaluative survey following the completion of the study is also included in our final report.

Now that we have set the stage with protocol and shared the research background, scope, and methods, it gives me great honour to share Truths- the Knowledges and storied experiences that were gifted during the research process.

Situating Research

The Truths shared reflect two Indigenous Autistic learners' voices and again, do not represent the whole of an Indigenous Autistic community and variations of our communities within oppressional intersectionality. They do however represent great wisdom and insight as well as immense courage, thoughtfulness, humility, and respect, all characteristics fundamental to advancing social justice and strengthening of cultural identities for Indigenous Autistic Peoples. We all have a story and there is something to learn from each story told. Within this ethic, I will also weave in perspectives, observations, and Teachings from Elder Phillip Gladue, Dr. Aaron Johannes, myself, and others for a more holistic, expansive exploration.

In sharing these Truths, I would like to invite you to join me in a time and space of visualization. We are coming from a place of understanding that within all our relations, including Human Beings, is a great fire within. This fire is our essence, our spirit. This great energy that is our being is always whole, formless, infinite, and powerful. It is the source of creation, of love and light. It is where we all come from and where we will all return to when we are called home. It is from this knowing that we acknowledge the inherent value and place of all of our relations in the web of life. It is with grave misfortune that this reverence is diminished, often violently, by human-made constructs- psychological, physical, and spiritual, and many relatives human and non-human are wounded.

This report, *Thrivival: The Fire Within* grounds us in the knowing that Indigenous Autistic Peoples are in constant conflict with oppressive sociological phenomena that is an attack on the fire within. They, like all our relations, are precious and need safety, peace, harmony, and

community to ensure their Thrivival. It is our hope that the storied experience of participants of this project educate on the ways their fire is suffocated in a post-secondary context, at real risk of extinguishing, and ways that, if they are supported, share their fire with others the way that Creator has intended.

Research Themes: Conditions for Thrivival

Creating the conditions for protection, preservation, and flourishing of the fire within can and does mean different things for different relatives. For the participants in this project, the collective storied experience highlights four overarching and interconnected themes that contextualize the suffocation or the Thrivival of their fire within: Self-Identity, Time, Balance, and Community.

Indigenous Neurodivergent Trauma Informed Lens

Before we explore these themes in relationship to research questions, it is important to emphasize that across these themes is a deeply rooted entanglement of complex trauma and stress that operates at micro, meso, and macro levels. It is the findings of this study and in my previous literature review, that chronic, ongoing exposure to oppressive, discriminatory, racist, ableist and hetero-cisgender normative sociological conditions and phenomena experienced by Indigenous Autistic People in systems and society in general, seriously impact health. Thrivival is heavily reliant upon a trauma-informed approach through an Indigenous Neurodivergent lens.

Within each emergent theme is expressed certainty that ideologies and practices within the post-secondary system and public at large, create and exacerbate traumatic experiences daily. Failing to realize this and respond accordingly in a proactive way to build the conditions needed for Thrivival, traumatization of Indigenous Autistic learners is perpetuated. In post-secondary this means by expecting conformity to the status quo, we expose Indigenous Autistic learners to profound isolation and neglect as students while upholding institutional structures, policy, spaces, and socialization that diminishes realization of full potential and respect for variant human expression. While in a day and age of “Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion” and “Indigenization” movements, the needle has not moved far enough on systemic, policy, and

social changes that mitigate the severity and complexity of traumas experienced within a Western education system for Indigenous Autistic learners.

Supporting all neurodivergent Indigenous learners to succeed in post-secondary life requires education, policy, and experiences that account for variation in neurology and in personal nervous system responses as well intergenerational trauma in addition to systemic traumas. This is trauma-informed care from a neurodivergent Indigenous lens. As we explore the themes of this project, examples will be shared by participants as to how they are experiencing an ongoing sense of fear, helplessness, and powerlessness in their educational experience and shed light on the ways they care for their fire within and seek solidarity and change in this pursuit.

Thrivival is Holistic

Building the fire within as expressed by our participants requires care and attention to four key components: Self-Identity, Time, Balance, and Community. Like Medicine Wheel Teachings, these components are interdependent and connected, and are in relationships with one another. Much like we observe in nature; for a seed to flourish, it needs a combination of earth, water, fire, and other elements. Building a fire is similar needing parts to make the whole. This is a Teaching of the Medicine Wheel; that without all, we are not whole. This is a foundational premise of this work and a hallmark for living Indigenization, decolonization, and practices of equity, diversity, and inclusion.

Elder Phillip Gladue led a workshop on Medicine Wheel Teachings to support participants to develop holistic and personalized digital stories. He shared “We need this tool to balance our own life. It's a tool. Remember that so you can use it many different ways. It doesn't have to be clockwise, either. You can go all over the place and deal with those issues that you need to deal with at that time. So I think it's a tool that's very easy to understand. It'll take us to where we actually want to go if we use it in a proper way”.

Just as a Medicine Wheel can follow multiple directions and uses, it is important to think of the main themes or “components” for Thrivival in this way. For sharing our storied experience, we will talk about the themes one by one but this does not suggest a linear approach. This is purely for sharing Truths and dialogue. In practice, it will be up to the individual institutions and its members as to where to start in taking action as a result of receiving the gift of this knowledge.

Thrivival: Self-Identity

Our story will begin with Self-Identity. While Indigenous ethics are as diverse as the Peoples they represent, a shared ethic among many Indigenous Nations is the idea of responsibility. While this notion encompasses many realms of responsibilities and unique responsibilities based on relationship and roles, it is widely taught that responsibility begins with self. As scholars Verna J. Kirkness and Ray Barnhardt (2001) puts it, higher education institutes must support learners to "exercise responsibility over their own lives" (p. 2). My previous research has shown Indigeneity is both a protective and positive factor in healthy identity formation. Less is known in research concerning the protective factors associated with belonging to the Autistic community as it is an under researched area. However, literature available corroborates my experience that, much like positively identifying as Indigenous, positively self-identifying as a member of the Autistic community is positively correlated with an increase in protective factors for improved individual health and wellbeing. Studies that examined Indigenous ethnic cultural and social identity brought to light cultural themes that bolster healthy social identity development, self-esteem, and mental wellbeing. Promising research demonstrates that when these cultural themes are woven in to self-determined, contextualized, personalized clinical and community-based interventions like culturally-responsive education and arts programming and this

programming accounts for historical and ongoing forms of discrimination, while at the same time, holds up a common Indigenous perspective that embodies the idea that each member is an important part of the larger whole and including the presence, perspective, and lived experience is as valid and meaningful as it is necessary, in shaping individual and collective cultural identity, Indigenous and Autistic individuals gain a richer sense of purposeful location within the web of life.

In sharing this next aspect of story, we have received permission from both participants to share stories with honesty. Observations and interpretations of communication are expressed with respect for the persons who shared and participated, and both have consented to the sharing of their story and our research teams findings no matter how difficult to hear, for the integrity of learning and truthfulness of the story told.

With this in mind, it pains me to share that I observed that there was a noticeable difference in the degree of self-confidence and self-esteem among participants. Both participants are very self-aware, clearly articulating their strengths and challenges, or stretches as I name them, however, one participant was more critical of self, making several self-deprecating statements and confiding that they struggled with self-image and self-worth. While some may attribute statements like “But what do I know” or “I do not have the knowledge or expertise to advise on educational policy” to personal humility, stories shared by this participant throughout sessions indicates a concerning pattern of self-internalized doubt and fear, and self-criticism. Research tells us that poor self-identity and mental health often stem from ongoing oppression and subjugation to social injustice, exclusion, and cultural genocide and tragically, a common experience among Indigenous Autistic Peoples (Simpson, 2021).

In exploring the concept of self-knowledge, participants shared that their sense of self-identity was connected to their identity as a post-secondary student and that each had a different concept of self based on their Indigeneity and being Autistic. One participant acknowledges autism as a disability while the other participant refers to being Autistic as being "A skilled and dedicated learner", rejecting a disability label in favour of a personal affirmation but later explained challenges in learning and perceived inequitable treatment by instructors related to having a disability saying, "I completed my first term, had some challenges with my disability but I have accommodations now put in place".

Regarding Indigeneity, the participant with a demonstrated level of higher self-esteem identified as Métis with Cherokee and mixed-European ancestry while the participant who struggled with self-confidence, identified as Filipino and First Nations but could not identify with a specific First Nation or Nations, sharing that "Unfortunately the residential school system was successful in erasing Indigenous connections between my family and the community".

In my personal experience, self-esteem and self-worth are impacted by cultural identities; that is, knowing who you are, where you come from, and who you belong to. In my life, it was not until I was reunited with my Secwepemc family and begun a process of reclaiming my cultural identity and heritage and was informally identified and then formally diagnosed with autism and ADHD, that I began to have a more grounded sense of self and an increase in self-confidence and esteem. While positive identity formation is much more complex and multi-factoral, it is possible that some of the mental health challenges experienced by one of our participants could be related to the disconnection and lack of membership to a named Indigenous community on Turtle Island, a genocidal legacy of colonial

assimilation policy and the residential school system as well as the long and unique legacy of colonization in the Philippines.

Elder Phillip Gladue taught the participants “Self-identity is so important. It doesn't matter whether you are Indigenous or not, because that tells who we are. And how we feel about ourselves before we can go forward with anything. To be safe in such a place, we can now feel free to learn”. Having a grounded sense of self provides an internalized sense of safety, a basic human need essential for living into our being and full potential.

On the identity of being a student, one participant never perceived themselves as being capable of success as a learner, saying “Having my disabilities is really challenging and to get an education, I had no motivation and didn't know the value of having an education”. It was not until they were underway in their first semester in post-secondary that they found their place among their cohort and area of study and deepened their understanding of their strengths and needs as a learner and the accommodations, relationships, and strategies that promoted their success beyond academic performance.

The other participant entered post-secondary confident in their academic abilities, commenting that their sense of self-identity and self-esteem rises and falls based upon their success in their schooling and specifically, educational achievement. They said “When I went into post-secondary the only thing that I feel like I had value in for others was my academic aptitude; combined with my financial situation I felt unbelievable pressure to do well in my courses. That pressure did not translate into motivation, as I frequently exhausted myself and developed extremely unhealthy habits to deal with the stress. Stress is also, highly, negatively correlated with creativity. In an academic setting that is a death sentence”.

This aspect of story teaches us that taking a strength-based approach to educational planning does help in bolstering one's self esteem and academic success to a degree. It does not however, prevent challenges that arise from programming or other demands that are perceived by the student to fall outside the their strengths or capabilities. One participant shared "I went into a technical degree program because I know that I am good at math and because I don't have confidence in my ability to communicate or inference. If I was, I'd be trying to become a politician. I know that my situation has been made more difficult because my weaknesses did not hold up well against the mandatory addition of ethics and writing-related skills that post-secondary institutions demand, even if my abilities with math are very strong".

As the participants told their stories, it was apparent that Thrivival in post-secondary (and beyond) is supported by a holistic sense of self-identity. As we explore the themes of Time, Balance, and Community through the participants storied experiences, we encourage listeners to reflect on the centrality of self-identity and the significance of this knowing. A sense of self is what inspired the actions participants have taken thus far in self-advocating and navigating their education and educational experiences based on their uniqueness. This knowing is what has inspired their contributions to this project and drawing from this insight to make recommendations for meaningful improvements in policy and practice. Moreover, self-identity is a powerful catalyst for belonging and citizenship. The participants come from two separate institutions and before this project, were not introduced to each other. This project gave each participant a group identity, a voice, responsibilities, autonomy over how to share their stories, and with that, a knowing that they are in fact, not alone no matter how isolating and exclusionary post-secondary can be for Indigenous Autistic learners.

Thrivival: Time

Self-identity as participants expressed in this study, evolves. Naturally over time, our being is shaped by a myriad of forces including context, time, and being in relationship. Time as a component to Thrivival, is situated within Indigenous perspectives, natural laws that instruct us that creation exists within a lifespan of seasons and often in unending, yet altered cycles influenced by internal and external factors. The development of self-identity and cultural identities are good representations of these natural laws. Set within the history and context of colonization, it is not uncommon for many Indigenous learners to first encounter Indigenous cultures and explore their Indigeneity in systems. Sometimes this is in education systems. Other times, systems of incarceration. The latter is another story for another day. Resulting from the colonial project, Indigenous Peoples have varied and diverse experiences and access to, cultures and everything that comes with it.

For those who grew up disconnected, like myself, and one of our participants, time has been a favorable component of our Thrivival. Our birthright and connection to kin delayed until much later in life. The way I describe this phenomenon is a homecoming. As a member of the neurodivergent community, I have heard this same sentiment shared when your neurodivergence is affirmed.

In exploring barriers and strategies in education and navigating systems of service and support, participants discussed time in their stories as a great opportunity or obstacle, and more often than not, time constraints preventing their flourishing. At the heart of opportunity was the mindful act of making time. Participants talked about the success they realize when giving themselves the time to reflect and then connect; time to check in with oneself and decide who and what is needed to navigate the given feelings or situation. Then giving themselves the time to act.

Time is an important component of self-determination however this is not a solo journey. The barriers highlighted in stories often were related to the lack of time given to students in reciprocity, when they reached out, sharing their time. Sometimes time is yielded in support and accommodation of learners, as both participants raised, being given extra time on exams or for assignment completion. This was the extent of the benefit of time mentioned by participants.

A Māori Knowledge Keeper, a Paeārahi, by the name of Keri Opai coined the word autism in te reo Māori as 'Takiwātanga'. He explains this as a "derivation of my phrase for autism: "tōku/tōna anō takiwā" meaning "my/his/her own time and space" (Altogether Autism, 2022, para. 3). Framing autism in this way is arguably more culturally appropriate for Indigenous Autistics given the differences in time conceptualization between Western and Indigenous worldviews (Western views on time as a resource and linear instead of conceived as nonlinear and more abstractly relative to spirituality, relationships, and creation). Both participants acknowledged the difficulty of conformity to rigid systems and expectations that enforced universal timelines for all learners. Western education by nature is prescriptive and

time-bound regardless of the delivery model of programming. For the standard semester-based programs, time constraints can impose greater challenge for students who require more time to process information, generate graded assignments, and are expected to perform academic exercises that require extensive cognitive energies within limited timeframes. For many neurodivergent learners, this is not conducive for effective learning or optimal academic performance. Often it exacerbates mental health challenges creating layered stresses for students.

One participant shared “The workload was large, but manageable. What I found to be the most difficult was juggling courses that I have little aptitude in with courses that I feel confident in. The former is emotionally and logistically taxing, as when I had to go through the courses for critical reading and writing and the ethics course, I felt… bad. Worthless” and “I have run into problems with group projects and in the more rigid course catalogue in areas that I’m weakest in – my bachelor of technology degree requires me to complete two very specific, and difficult, writing and comprehension-based courses as I mentioned earlier”.

The participant reported these course-work experiences were followed by emotional and physical withdrawal academically and socially, sharing that “dealing with the mandatory critical reading and writing course and mandatory ethics course for my bachelor's degree” made them become “a lot less motivated to do anything”. Though the participant reflected on systemic barriers they did identify struggles with liberal arts coursework as a personal failure. The participant shared “Just like students can't take infinite information, they can't learn an infinite amount of things in a short period of time. I mean, let's look at the examples that I just brought up earlier where I just had a lot of trouble with. Like my ethics course in my critical

reading and writing course simply because I'm just not very good with that kind of stuff. I guess I should blame my disability for that. It wasn't easy, fun or it doesn't it didn't feel reasonable, honestly".

This same participant raised concerns for students who they deemed as socially or economically disadvantaged, expressing that a "whole bunch of these socio-economic factors are correlated to a person's aptitude and problem solving, and in like being able to complete coursework or pay attention to stuff. And it's like, hell, that's all related to stress and stuff like that".

To support neurodivergent Indigenous students to be successful in Westernized education systems, we must account for and tend to additional demands experienced by neurodivergent Indigenous learners, for example, increased cognitive and social demands, by adjusting policy and practices so that they do not use time as a tool of the system but rather as a component to facilitate Indigenous Autistic Thrivival. Forcing a status quo and conformity to the rigidity of a time-bound system will not serve many Indigenous Autistic learners. Like building a fire teaches us, if the fire burns hot and bright for the short-term, it will likely become ash before long. If we build a fire to a consistent and steady pace, the fire will keep longer. While we may be unable to change rigidity of time constraints in post-secondary, it is possible to challenge the contraction of time by expansion; that is reforming systems, structures, policies, and practices that account for implications of trauma and neurodivergence and seek out alternative representations of learning that is person-centred and achieved at their pace in their learning journey. Participants of this study tell us that effective practices of equity, diversity, and inclusion are situated in a decolonized perspective that there is more than one

Truth and more than one way to do and to be. While we have made some advances in this regard in teaching and learning such as in models like Universal Design for Learning (UDL), this model is situated in a Western science perspective, and still upholds the idea that learning is outcome or competency based. Where we can see an Indigenization of UDL is in promoting the belief that learning happens in relationship with the environment and is emergent, not prescriptive. This is not totally self-directed as there is an interconnected ebb and flow between all present. The relationship and pedagogy we see in our natural laws and how Elders carry themselves serve as optimal examples. Everyone is a learner, and everyone is a teacher, human and non-human.

In addition to the concern of a suitable system, curriculum, and pedagogy relative to time, is the concern of timely access to some student services and supports, namely student counselling. Time was not an issue for both participants in accessing Indigenous Student Services, Student Aid support, and Disability Services. Regarding Indigenous Student Services, participants gained a kind of support- social and spiritual that, while it did not address academic challenges, provided them with needed outlets and connections to alleviate stresses. For example, one participant spoke about accessing quieter campus space in the Indigenous Student lounge and both participants talked positively about the cultural opportunities and relationships they had established. One shared that “The post-secondary institution I attend provides suitable services relative to the program I’m in. I have been trying to learn to program, made decent progress, and was able to access Indigenous culture through the Indigenous services facility and their engagement with the students” and the other that “The Indigenization office makes it [school] a safe place, and we can be who we are, we can speak our own

languages, have our cultures and traditions because of the Indigenization office. We are welcome. Which I don't think any other institutions have right now. So, it's very special".

Unfortunately, for both participants, accessing student counselling is not readily available. During a time of high stress during studies, one participant recalled "Counseling was difficult to access. I tried booking appointments a few days ago but the earliest opening for me is like a month later, which is not great for someone that is in a great amount of stress or hurting quite a bit. Like Disability resources, disability services, whatever you call it, was pretty accommodating, honestly. Like appointments are a lot more reliable to get in. It's a lot easier to know in advance when there's going to be an exam but knowing when you're having a mental health crisis in advance is basically impossible. And I had trouble dealing with them and I feel like this is going to be chronic".

While time is not a commodity, it is sacred and as such, we have a responsibility to be stewards of time and especially the time our learners and all the learning that comes through time. Such a shining example of this sentiment is shared by Elder Phil as he acknowledges the participants for the gift of their time in sharing their stories: "OK, first of all, I want to thank both of them for sharing their knowledge and experience and that's what it's going to take to go forward. All of us coming together and sharing our life experiences. I'm sure I've gone through a lot of the same things as you people have gone through. But at the same time, I've learned from the past what works and what doesn't work, and I think participating in this session or creating a research program to make that number one, to create a safe place for all of us to be. And I just want to share that with you, and I know you've expressed that already, and that's a good thing. I'm being honest. So that make it easier for the ones that are going to

come behind us. I look forward to working with you people, and I'm learning also. Whatever you bring into this basket or into the circle is what we're all going to learn, and from that, we can build something that'll work for most of the people that's going to come into the same basket that we're in".

Thrivival: Balance

In introducing our next component, we ask *what does balance mean*? From a Western perspective in education, it might mean reading, writing, and arithmetic- all mental exercises. From an Indigenous perspective, this theme encompasses a holistic view, recognizing that balance is found when all aspects are brought into harmony. Indigenization is a philosophy and practice that strives for greater balance in education, embracing and lifting up Indigenous ways to move beyond Eurocentric ways and traditions. This is an incomplete picture as it still leaves out representation that is neither Indigenous nor Westernized. For a fulsome representation of balance, we can look to The Sacred Circle Teachings or Medicine Wheel Teachings as it is often referred to by its Anglo-Saxon name. Aspects of these Teachings represent humanity as made up of mental, physical, emotional, and spiritual aspects of self, while other Teachings emphasize the interrelatedness, interconnectivity, and holism that is natural to the Circle. As Teachings it is told that we are not whole without all, and what is not whole is imbalanced as all parts need each other.

Similarly, the concept and prayer of All Our Relations emphasises respect and honour for the balance of life. Indigenous Nations have their own sets of laws and ethics that govern social and environmental responsibility however one commonality between First Nations,

Métis, and Inuit worldviews is a shared belief of All My Relations; that all living and nonliving have a place and significance in the universe. In other words, we are all related and everything is connected.

For the participants of this project, the conceptualization of balance from an Indigenous perspective was a main focal point for one of the participants. In the telling of their story, they opted to share a series of graphic representations of different sacred circle concepts with the intention of using the symbolism and interpretations of the symbolism to inform and guide their responses to each research question and their recommendations for improving educational opportunity for all learners. The other participant explored the concept of balance in a way that spoke to the individuality and unique career path of learners in post-secondary, advocating that not all disciplines should be treated the same in program requirements.

Both participants expressed concern about the imbalance of course load for Indigenous Autistic learners, both requiring a reduction of course load to the 40% threshold acceptable for qualifying for Student Aid BC as a fulltime student as their only strategy to manage academic demands and rigor. It was the shared experience that participants were unable to satisfy the demands of mandatory coursework at a higher course load. For one participant, this meant failing the same writing course twice, explaining that for them, mandatory courses outside their mathematic and computing strength areas “require twice as much an effort to get half as many returns”. For the other, it meant being on academic probation in their first semester of post secondary and passing all courses with the minimum grades required. From these experiences, both participants changed their approach to course work to register for a maximum of two

courses per semester so that they could continue enrolment as fulltime student. This however does not provide the equitable experience of graduating on time with a peer cohort.

In exploring balance, one participant raised a concern related to Institute's responsiveness to Truth and Reconciliation and the Calls to Action and other mandates as established in the advancement of Indigenous rights. When asked about their thoughts on coursework that teaches about the history of Canada, the history of Indigenous Peoples and Indigenous rights and justice issues for example, the participant was clear that this training should not be universal in post-secondary but dependent on the career path of the student. They expressed "I do think that from my experience as a programmer and experience as a student in general, more instructional material to address discrimination could be done and should be done. Like, especially in say health care or policing, but like it should be done in fields where like the neglect of such things is going to have very real and dire consequences. However, students shouldn't be expected to take this course like say something, something less ah... What's the word? People oriented, I guess, or something more like the ability for someone to like, absolutely destroy someone else's life isn't really that much of a possibility". They build upon this by adding "I am aware however that including more instructional material should take into context the problems that such material should address. The information that a student can take in at once is not infinite, and some students specifically enter a program in an effort to specialize in something that they feel confident in doing. That factor counterbalances the benefits of such instructional material in their ability to counter externalities".

Instead of a universal mandatory course of this nature, this participant says "I think that in terms of prejudice and discrimination, that is something that definitely needs to be giving them more attention in high school" and goes on to say "I also believe that if you need post-secondary education to become a more reasonable voter, that's not indicative of the success of post-secondary, but a failure in the education system in instilling that information before voters reach the age of majority".

The idea that balance is achieved by the sharing of roles and responsibilities was a message expressed as well by the other participant in their digital story titled *My Medicine Wheel*. Seven graphics were selected, each depicting different applications of Medicine Wheel Teachings with all supporting a fundamental message that Thrivival is dependent on interdependence. For this participant, achieving balance in post-secondary education expands beyond the brick and mortar and studies, but requires care and attention to all the essentials that make attending school and thriving in it possible for mature learners, things like employment, income, housing, public safety, community engagement, and access to quality care. The participant acknowledged these essentials as medicines needing to be balanced to achieve wellness as a learner. The participant's story continued exploring balance through Wheels that depicted the Teaching of All Our Relations, to ground us in a knowing, in their words that "We all come from the center, which is the Creator" and "The birds, the animals, they're all part of Mother Earth, and for me, it is important".

The participant's story too symbolized the balancing of roles that they play; Visionary, Healer, Teacher, and Warrior, and the values that would support realization of success in these roles; Truth, Love, Wisdom, and Courage. To answer our research questions, the participant

reflected that we need to look at ourselves, saying that this Wheel are “the really important things again to keep the balance in to things”. For the participant, living out this character and roles, is supported by balancing a life filled with practices and traditions that nurture this way of being. The participant told this part of the story using an application of the Medicine Wheel for aspiring to mental wellness from a holistic perspective, sharing personal practices like exercising, sleeping, eating well along with practicing forgiveness, spending time in nature, attending an African church, and practicing self- reflection. The participant shared “I reflected a lot on myself in this research program and I am able to recognize my weaknesses, strengths, barriers, and obstacles I can overcome in the next term when I start in September”.

This participant’s story expands the concept of balance beyond oneself. It encompassed a recognition that if Mother Earth is not balanced, everyone suffers. They said “The reason why I chose that one [graphic] is because there’s four seasons which is supposed to keep the world balanced. But right now with how things are, the world is really unbalanced because we took advantage of Mother Earth and we should not take things for granted because life is a gift”. Selecting an image for story that represents aspects of the Four Directions, such as the seasons of nature and humanity and animals and their Teachings associated to cardinal directions, the participant said, “For me, it's important to keep things [these Teachings] in balance. Without that balance things are the way they are right now”.

Finding a pathway to balance, is according to our participants story, an interplay between internal and external worlds with Mother Earth and creation as a connector. The final two graphics representing the participants urging of practices for achieving balance represent these realms. One graphic selected depicts a Wheel for meditation to ground to Mother Earth

and the other, a Wheel representing four races of humanity and their responsibilities to natural elements. To close their story the participant shares “I'm like an explorer like Star Trek and there's a lot of cultures and religions out there. I respect everyone's culture, religion, I don't discriminate people and stuff. You know, there's more than four Nations, but for Indigenous People, it's about the land. And I guess for some other people, it's air or water, depending on where you're living. On fire, I know some African people because I go to the church. It's about the fire as well, and just with the Nations and the different Earth elements is important to keep balance again, and we all come from the center, which is the Creator”.

Thrivival: Community

This aspect of their story segues well into the last component of Thrivival, Community, but to conclude an exploration of balance, Elder Phillip offers important considerations for both within the post-secondary landscape and as citizens on Indigenous land. As Indigenous Peoples, our histories, ways, and stories have been white-washed, buried, erased. Indigenization and decolonization in post-secondary will only be possible by balancing Truth and Reconciliation. There can be no relationship if we cannot have an honest relationship with ourselves.

Elder Phil teaches us “Of our history, the history of Canada itself, whether it's Indigenous or not, we all need to look at that picture and see how can we make a change here? How can we make it better going forward with kind of the destruction that happened here in our history? So it's going to take time and it's going to need to go into education system. And you're going to go through struggles. Because it's been this way for a long, long time since the beginning. Of the decolonization here in Canada, what does that mean? For me, it means for me to be able to try and work things out. Coming from both sides, the Western worldview and Indigenous worldview and a lot of times I call it the natural worldview. We need to understand we're here for a reason, everybody is here for a reason. And until we understand the natural side of our life balance, it is going to be hard for us to move forward. Because we tend to mess things up as human beings. We need to look back and acknowledge what gives us life. What

gave us that, what do we need to keep healthy for us to keep going? The Earth is what we need. An Indigenous worldview comes from the Earth, everything that comes from natural world is what the Indigenous worldview is. So it's hard for the Western worldview to see that because they come, 90 percent of the people of the world come from a perspective of the science worldview. Mind your science, we need science. But we can't forget the natural worldview. We've got to balance that and we're not doing it today. That's why we're in a big mess today. Not only with our health, but what's going on throughout the world. Look at the wars going on. Something is not balanced here. So we need to come together to make that balance, and it's going to be hard for the people that believe in all the scientific side of life".

We need to come together and community is an essential component of Indigenous Autistic Thrivival. This was the wisdom shared by Elder Phil and our two Participants. The fire within is strengthened and sustained in relationship and connection with our People, our Ancestors, our Cosmology, Nature, and the Creator. For Indigenous Peoples it is in the blood memory we carry that tells us that though we might feel alone, we are not. We are still here. We have always been here and we always will. As a group cast to the margins in education and in society because we were born into the "other", many Indigenous and Autistic Peoples struggle to feel a sense of safety, security, and belonging. I have heard many stories from relatives that out of fear, they could not acknowledge their cultural heritage as Indigenous. The same is true for my relatives that are neurodivergent. Prevalent racism and discrimination in Western society have made it unsafe to do so. Social isolation is made further complex by the degrees of cultural and familial separation that has happened because of colonization and impacts of assimilation policy on Indigenous Peoples and for Autistic Peoples, the challenges

associated to autism identification. While this is not everyone's experience, it is the experience of many, including myself.

It was with this understanding that this project's main priority was holding a safer space for all our members, especially our participants. Elder Phil explained early on to our participants that community building starts with and is maintained with safety. As Elder Phil often says "Safety is number one". Our protocols, values and practices are followed for a reason, and the foundation is safety and respect. Before the study began, Elder Phil shared his perspectives on what it means to hold a safer space together as we journeyed forward in the project. In a later session, he added to his Teaching, acknowledging that learning and participating is only made possible when a person feels safe. Sharing from his history and experiences, Elder Phil said "You need to be in a safe place to do that [express self and participate] where people are respecting you or where people are taking in knowledge that was never told in the education system. So sometimes it's hard for people that don't understand that concept, not having those life experiences. They tend to go to the head all the time. All of us do that. We always forget are our emotions, our spirit, who we are. We shut it off and that's what happened to us, to our whole history. Colonization, everything was shut off. We needed to try and fit in a certain box to be accepted, to be able to be a part of the society. Obviously, it hasn't worked for the last 500 years, but we're at a time now. It's OK to identify who you are to feel good about who you are".

Holding safer space was essential to community building in this project and provided the environment where we could hold each other up during difficult conversations and be honest sharing intimate details and Truths of lived experiences. Everyone who participated in this

project understood this as a shared responsibility and all contributed to creating a safer environment. This was achieved through participant-to-participant support, Elder support, my facilitation practice, and the practice of traditions like introduction protocol, sharing circles, and consensus governance. Decolonizing our research processes was as important as the results we worked towards.

Establishing a safer environment for this study inspired ethical citizenship in practice. Participants demonstrated great respect, care, and concern for each other, making comments like “You're welcome, and this is a judgment free zone. And that's a safe place for anyone to share anything, and it's safe in that circle, but thank you for acknowledging that”, “Thank you. Oh, good, you're doing great” and “I just wanted to give some acknowledgement of the courage and bravery it took to share with what was said. So I just wanted to say thank you for sharing that”.

Encouragement of active citizenship and inclusion occurred throughout sessions and was upheld and promoted by our Elder. He emphasized to the participants the importance of telling their stories, their Truths, in an honest way and to know the value of their knowledge and experiences. Elder Phil said “I want to thank you for sharing. That is very honest. It's coming from a good place. You didn't read it in the book, you experience it. That's very genuine and that's what it's going to take for this circle. To be strong, when we're honest and bring things forward, then we can make changes when we start to hear those things. All of us working together somehow somewhere. You're going to help other people. Like I say, you guys are teachers, we're all teachers. Nobody's like Heather said, nobody is higher than anybody else in the circle. We're all equal here. To have a space to be able to say how we feel, how we think.

And how we see things. So we're going to learn some of that as we move forward and you know, this is like the beginning. It's good I hear it. It makes me feel good because I've seen these [issues] for many, many years in my lifetime. It's happening. It's changing, it's changing in the school system, it's changing in our whole society, that is why we're talking about it. Something is making a change, and we're doing it here. We're just a little tiny particle of it. So again, I want to share that with you guys and I just want to say, don't give up. Because you're making steps forward right now. By just introducing yourself who you are and wanting to make that change and there's going to be other people that's going to come behind us".

Sharing stories and experiences was another significant aspect of building community in our study. When one participant shared their story, it invited the other to reflect on their experiences and share, building from each other and contributing to a feeling of shared storied experience. For example, one participant observed "Seems mental health is like something that's shared by us".

Stories are a powerful medium for conveying knowledge and understanding as we know well through the oral traditions of Indigenous Peoples over millennia across the globe. Stories are also essential to forging strong community, transmitting culture, instilling ethics, values, and influencing actions.

In helping prepare the participants to create personalized and meaningful digital stories, Dr. Johannes shared "So many complexities to so many stories, and I find that really interesting. Indigenous students certainly have stories and are, you know, the tradition in education. This one student was telling me his mother-in-law was kind of… she thought there were gaps in his education and so what she did was she invited him to come and learn how to harvest fish, how

to can fish. And then he went and he spent like a week and they were canning salmon. And he said at the end of the week, he had a whole sense of the history and the origins and the myths and also matriarchy. He was marrying into a matriarchal family. And so he had a whole different worldview than he'd had at the beginning of the week. So he was theoretically there to learn how to can fish, but in reality, he was there to hear the stories right, which are now deep in his heart".

For the participants of this study, improving education and educational experiences requires much more than improvements to the transactional nature of knowledge consumption and representation. From an Indigenous perspective, education is not individualized but a collective responsibility and making positive changes requires us to be community minded and mind those in our community. The stories as told by the participants carry guidance on how to create a community within educational settings for which Indigenous Autistic learners are safe, respected, and cared for. They also think of community beyond the Institute, and hold expectations that supporting individuals, whether they are adult learners, are not just the role and responsibility of their Institute, but of the societies that they are members. From the macro concept of community and specifically addressing the issue of internalized oppression, one participant asserts "In general, I think the logic would track that people that are disadvantaged due to cultural or economic reasons wouldn't feel that much confidence in trying to…like, they wouldn't feel very motivated to get into post-secondary because they feel worthless already. So, what is the point of even trying in something that looks difficult? It probably is going to be hell. And from an economic perspective, the consequences of that are bad, you know, so like that is something that needs to be done on the long term and needs to be addressed. And it

requires more than what a post-secondary institution could provide, like honestly, if we're talking about, say First Nations communities, that's something that Elders needs to like or like you know, common…like not just elders, but like, say, adults in general should try to inspire into their kids in the next generation to try and like feel like they can do things that seem difficult".

On a micro level, community development within post-secondary and teaching and learning environments requires taking in to account the different sensory needs of class members. One participant's story expressed the barriers that they encounter that disrupt their learning capabilities for example, when there is cross talking from the other students in the classroom that is not relevant to the teachings and has overtaken the instructor while speaking. Over the course of their semester, they reflected on their learning preferences and advocated with instructors for alternative opportunities for tests and assessment. In one case, the participant tells, an instructor allowed the participant to visually represent their ideas and it resulted in an improved grade for the participant then the previously failed assignment.

Building community with Indigenous Autistic learners goes beyond their active citizenship in teaching and learning environments. It goes beyond the individual learner in question and calls in all to the circle. This includes those yet not present or whose voices are not included. Many Indigenous cultures share a future-facing perspective, an ethic that governs what is good for the collective must be good for future generations. One of my Elders, Ken Pruden, from the Métis Nation has taught me, we do not borrow the Earth from our ancestors, we borrow the Earth from our children.

This Teaching is the ethic that inspired modifying our research framework to include exploration of participant insights of Collective Good and Critical Hope. The legacies that our

participants desire to leave behind for those that come behind them are to remind that "Students, the learners are the teachers" and that the stories told contribute to "making the world better for everyone" and for Indigenous Autistic Peoples, to instill "a belief we can be who we are. We can connect to our spirit and ourselves to learn in a safe place. Being in the circle". For the participants, they were motivated to be involved with this study and use their storied experiences to help make things better, recognizing their trauma, grief, struggles, and Thrivival can be a steppingstone for one and for many. In critical hope, they know their stories can inform change because they provide insight and context about "the problems that are faced by not just like Indigenous People, but also neurodivergent people". They have bestowed a great gift to us now and to those in the future. We have a great responsibility in what we do with the knowledge we now carry.

Future Directions

Understanding the Indigenous Autistic experience must be ongoing. Like all other cultures, the experiences and stories are as diverse as the Peoples they represent. Indigenous teaching and learning celebrate the gift of lifelong learning. This project has provided an enormous amount of knowledge and many more pathways to explore and better support the Thrivival of Indigenous Autistic learners in post-secondary and as a distinct cultural group in general.

Suggested future directions were shared by one of our participants and to close our collective story, we will end with their advice; “I think that in addition like further experiments can be done to determine like what other challenges, or what other problems can be solved or like anticipated, for example, cognition, like measuring the ability to solve problems, to come up with new ideas or take in information. Measure that ability, those abilities against stress levels, self worth. And against like, say, maybe even just fear. Measuring someone’s ability to like problem solve after they have been scared half to death or something. Experiments in a controlled environment could be helpful. Of course get the consent of people you are experimenting on first”.

Closing Words

This concludes our presentation *Thrivival: The Fire Within*. Thank you to our courageous leaders and guides, our participants, for sharing your story with the world. It is now up to those who have heard it to do something for the better for Indigenous Autistic learners. Thank you to our project Elder Phillip Gladue for your guidance and support of this project at every stage, for sharing your perspectives with us throughout this journey, and for encouraging our participants to be proud of themselves and the important work they did and still do. Thank you to Dr. Johannes for inspiring our participants and equipping them with further confidence and tools to tell their stories. Thank you to Wendy Parry for offering your gifts of research, writing, and storytelling to help bring all these pieces together and to you, the listeners, for tuning in to hear and learn from these stories. You are now apart of the collective story. What story will you create?

Frameworks

figure 1. Modified Aboriginal Education Framework (Thompson Rivers University, 2010)

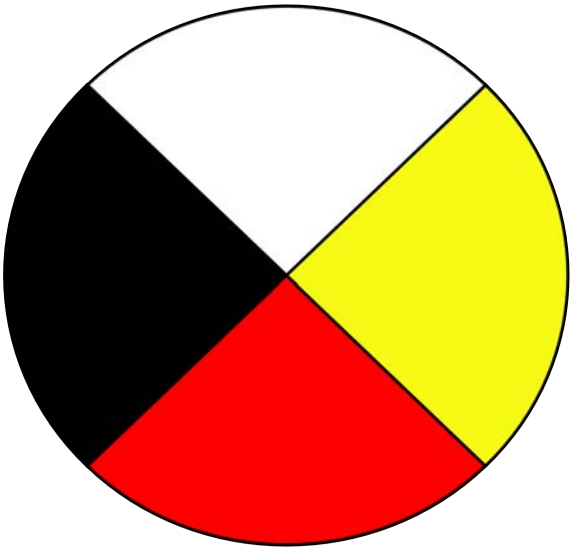


figure 2. Medicine Wheel (Creative Commons Image)

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