**Transcript of Thrivival: The Fire Within
Project Lead and Speaker: Heather Simpson**

HEATHER SIMPSON:

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 I would like to introduce and situate myself, as well as 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'm a descendant from the River People 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 and 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 and an Indigenous language. I've 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 a 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 complements my twenty plus years and human service and education, where I've 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 belong to. Day by day in this season of my life, I am beginning to.

This journey began with a curiosity of self-identity and a 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 still 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 experiences of life and the intersection of Indigeneity and autism, I know firsthand the level and degree of challenges faced in different arenas, including post-secondary education. As a parent to three neuro- divergent 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's 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 that 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 teaching 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 to Elder Lillian Howard, Muchalaht First Nation.

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 the co-chair for the 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 Missing Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls. 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 counsel 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 phenomenon 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.

Acknowledgments.

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 a 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 acknowledgment of Dave Smulders and Stephen O'Hearn with JIBC's Centre for Teaching, Learning, and Innovation for helping share this oral presentation today.

It is with the 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-secondarys 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 policymakers 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. ᑕᓂᓯ (Tanisi). Hello. My name is Phillip Gladue and I am a Métis-Cree Elder. 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 BC public school system from kindergarten to higher education for many years. During this time, I've yet to see a research project like the one that we're proposing today. It is the first of its kind. What I have seen are students from the earliest of ages, who are Autistic or living with other disabilities as well as 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 lose their lives. This research is to help create a safer place for Indigenous Autistic students to come out of their shell and through Aboriginal ways of doing, create cultural opportunities so that students 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 perspectives about what your community is going through and supporting these young people to live their fullest potential. We hope you'll 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 BC's educators with tools and knowledges that are self-determined and self-created by Indigenous Peoples for Indigenous People and will benefit all people. To make real change in our communities, there is no other way.

I will see you again. All my relations, Elder Phillip Gladue.

Research done in a good way.

As Elder Phillip 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 in a gap in much needed information to improve educational experiences and outcomes for a student body that is often relegated to the margins in post-secondary and society in general.

Before we finalize the scope and focus of this project our research team followed protocol and extended an invitation to the First Nations of whose land partnering post-secondary institutes are located. This includes Squamish, Musqueam, Qayqayt, and Tsleil-Waututh Nations. We invited Nations to be involved and compensated in the research project from its inception so that the direction and outputs can directly benefit and fit within 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 of the esteemed partners. It is situated in a knowing that the Canadian public post-secondary system was created and is maintained as 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 could 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 and education prevent any real progress to achieving greater equity, diversity and inclusion in BC postsecondary in general and in a teaching and learning context. It also prevents institutions, in this case, public postsecondary from meeting its responsibility to build a school ecosystem not on a singular truth, but multiple truths so that all students, staff, and faculty are respectfully served. To assert the necessity and value of Indigenous-Autistic perspectives in the development and transformation of education and educational practices, we used a participatory action research design. Also called PAR.

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 to 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 teaching 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 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. That is also a model that aligns with values and perspectives exemplified in the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's Calls to Action and the province of British Columbia's Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples Act, 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 and control and ownership of research and the research process shared. The PAR research model upholds integral principles and concepts as central to ethics, efficacy, and appropriateness required in this area of research, such as the protection of human rights, dignity, self-determination and sovereignty, and concepts of shared power, accessibility and holism.

The research problem described originally was limited by my perspective and my 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 and questions.

Research shows the absence of culturally responsive services and supports for Indigenous and Autistic peoples in educational and disability service spaces is correlated to negative social outcomes in holistic individual and public health and in the field of education. As a potential way to address the research problem as it's 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 River University's Aboriginal Education Framework. This mapping exercise was followed by 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 and Traditions, Services and 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 a sense of purpose in post-secondary? For History and Traditions, how do learners and postsecondary access cultural history, knowledges, 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 the 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 as it is powerful, a powerful means for promoting community dialogue and creating opportunities for individual and community change. and is a method of research that shows greater efficacy in helping Autistic participants voice their perspective. Arguably, digital storytelling as a 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. Photovoice is an example methodology utilized by Hanemaayer et al. and Genuis, Willows and Jardine 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. In Freeman et al., researchers working with the 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.

Instead of selecting a specific technology like Photovoice, or WeVideo, we invited participants to share digital stories that consisted of choice content that might include photographs or other images, video and audio recordings, artwork and/or songs and music, into a private individual and secured Canadian-housed digital drop-box, with Sync.com, shared between the participants 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 a separate slide and provided an oral explanation of the submission during a recorded live session. Another participant chose to use the voiceover 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 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 a various protocol such as land acknowledgments, and an 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, session five and session 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 well-being of people with disabilities. Dr. Johannes is a skilled graphic artist and facilitator and provided the 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 experience and Teachings on all the topics introduced and explored to provide an Indigenous perspective that participants learn from and can 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 the 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's 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 the 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 when we're 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 storage experience of participants in 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, hetero-cisgender normative sociological conditions, and the 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 postsecondary, 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 the 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 Western education systems 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 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 that 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 relationship 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 lives. It is a tool. Remember that so you can use it in 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. I think it's a tool that's very easy to understand. It takes 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 actions 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 relationships and roles, it is widely taught that responsibility begins with self. As scholars Verna Kirkness and Ray Barnhardt put it, higher education institutes must support learners to exercise responsibility over their own lives. 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 experiences that much like positively identifying as Indigenous, positively self-identifying as a member of the Autistic community is positively correlated with an increase of protective factors for improved individual health and well-being. Studies that examined Indigenous, ethnic, cultural, and social identity brought to light cultural themes that bolster healthy social identity development, self-esteem, and mental well-being. Promising research demonstrates that when these cultural themes are woven into self-determined, contextualized, personalized, and 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 common Indigenous perspective that embodies the idea that each member is an important part of the larger whole and includes the presence, perspective, and lived experiences 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 team 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 don't have the knowledge or expertise to advise on educational policy" to personal humility, stories shared by this participant throughout the sessions indicated 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 the ongoing oppression and subjugation to social injustice, exclusion and cultural genocide and tragically a common experience among Indigenous Autistic Peoples.

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, that each had a different concept of self based on their Indigeneity and being Autistic. One participant acknowledged autism as a disability, while the other participant referred to being Autistic as being a skilled and dedicated learner, rejecting a disability label in favour of a personal affirmation, but later explains 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 began a process of reclaiming my cultural identity and heritage and 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-factorial, 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're Indigenous or not, because that tells who you 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 full being and potential.

On the identity of being a student, one participant never perceived themselves as being capable of success as a learner saying, "Having my disability 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 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 on their success in their schooling and specifically educational achievement. They said "When I went into post-secondary, the only thing that I felt 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 their strengths, or capabilities. One participant shared, "I went into a technical degree program because I know that I'm good at math and because I don't have confidence in my abilities 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 are math-- with math are very strong."

As the participants told their stories, it was apparent that Thrivival in postsecondary 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 education and their 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 of the 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 is often an 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 the education system. 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 come 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 neuro- divergent community, I've heard the same sentiment shared when your neurodivergence is affirmed.

In exploring barriers and strategies and education and navigating systems of service and support, participants described time and 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 realized 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 than giving themselves the time to act.

Time is an important component of self-determi,ation. 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, meaning my/his/her own time and space." Framing autism in this way is arguably more culturally appropriate for Indigenous and Autistics given their difference in time conceptualization between Western and Indigenous worldviews. Western views on time as a resource and linear, instead of conceived as non-linear 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 time frames. For many neuro-, divergent 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 had little aptitude in with the courses that I felt confident in. The former is emotionally and logistically taxing, as when I have 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 and 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 participants reported these coursework experiences were followed by emotional and physical withdrawal academically and socially, sharing that "dealing with the mandatory critical reading and writing courses 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 participants 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 examples that I just brought up earlier where I had a lot of trouble with. Like my ethics course and my critical reading and writing courses simply because I'm not very good with that kind of stuff. I guess I should blame my disability for that. It wasn't easy, fun, and it didn't feel reasonable, honestly."

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

To support neuro- divergent Indigenous students to be successful in Westernized education systems, we must account for and tend to the additional demands experienced by neuro- divergent Indigenous learners, e.g. 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 too 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 the expansion of it. 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-centered and achieved at their pace in their learning journey. Participants of this study tells 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. That 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 suitable system, curriculum, and pedagogy relative to time is the concern of timely access to some students services and supports, namely student counseling. Time was not an issue for both participants in accessing Indigenous Student Services, Student Aid support and Disability Services. Regarding Indigenous Students 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, when participants spoke about accessing quieter campus space and the Indigenous Student lounge. And both participants talk positively about the cultural opportunities and relationships they had established. One shared "the post-secondary institution I attend provides suitable services relative to the program I am in. I've 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 said, "the Indigenization office makes 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, both participants accessing student counseling 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, but the earliest appointment for me was like a month later, which is not great for someone that's 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. 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 of 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 and sharing their stories: "Okay, first of all, I want to thank both of them for sharing their knowledge and experiences. And that's what it's going to take to go forward. All of us coming together and sharing our 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 work, what works and what doesn't work. And I think participating in this session and creating a research program to make that number one, to create a safe place for us all to be. And I just wanted to share that with you and know that you've expressed that already and that's a good thing. I'm being honest. So that makes 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 will work for most 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 tradition. 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's 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 inter-relatedness, 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 emphasizes respect and honour for the balance of life. Indigenous Nations have their own set of laws and ethics that govern social and environmental responsibility. However, one commonality between First Nations, Métis, and Inuit worldviews is a shared belief that all living and nonliving have a place insignificance in the universe. In other words, we're 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 and the telling of their story. They often 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 full-time 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 mathematics and computing strength areas "require twice as much effort to get half as many returns." For the other, it meant being on academic probation and their first semester of postsecondary and passing all courses with minimum grades required. From these experiences, both participants changed their approach to coursework to register for a maximum of two courses per semester so that they could continue enrollment as full-time students. This, however, does not provide the equitable experience of graduating on time with a peer cohort.

In exploring balance, one participant raise 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 it should be done in fields where like the neglect of such things is going to have a very real and dire consequences. However, students should be, shouldn't be expected to take this course. Like say something, something... What's the word? People oriented, I guess? Or something like the ability for someone like absolutely to 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 materials 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 and 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 and instilling that information before voters reached the age of majority."

The idea that balance is achieved by the sharing of roles and responsibilities was the 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 and 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 Teachings of all our relations to ground us in a knowing that, in their words, "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 that is important."

The participant's story too symbolized the balance of roles that they play: Visionary, Healer, Teacher and Warrior; and the values that would support realization of their 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 "really the important things 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. I'm able to recognize my weaknesses, strengths, barriers and obstacles I can overcome in the next term, when I started 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 participants said, "for me it's important to keep these 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 participant's story an interplay between two internal and external worlds, with Mother Earth and creation as the connector. The final two graphics representing the participant's urging of practices for achieving balance represents these realms. One graphics 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 are 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. Or fire. I know some African people because I go to the church. It's all about fire as well. And just with the Nations and different earth elements, it's important to keep in balance again, we all come from the center, which is the Creator."

Thrivival: Community.

This aspect of their story segues 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 whitewashed, 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 we can make a change here? How can we make it better going forward with the kind of destruction that happened here in our history? It's going to take time and it's going to need to go into the 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 worldviews. And a lot of times I call it the natural world view. We need to understand we're here for a reason and everybody is here for a reason. 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. And everything that comes from the natural world is what an Indigenous worldview is. It's hard for Western worldview to see that because 90% 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 world view. 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. 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've 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 has 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 perspective on what it means to hold a safer space together as we journey forward in the project. In a later session, he added to his Teachings, acknowledging that learning and participating is only made possible when a person feel safe. Sharing from his history and experiences, Elder Phil says, "you need to be in a safe place to do that, express self and participate, where people are respecting you and where people are taking new 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 our emotions, our spirit, who we are. We shut it off and that's what happened to us too. Our whole history, colonization, everything was shut off. We need to try and fit into certain box to be accepted and to be able to be a part of the society. Obviously, it hasn't worked for the last 500 years. And we're at a time now, it's okay to identify who you are and feel good about who you are."

Holding safer space was essential to community-building in this project and provided the environment where we can 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, 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 an important, was as important as the results we were working 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 I thank you for acknowledging that or thank you. Oh, good. You're doing great. I just wanted to give you some acknowledgment of the courage and bravery it took to share with what was said. And so I just wanted to thank you for sharing that."

Encouragement of active citizenship and inclusion occurred throughout the 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 to know the value of their knowledge and experiences. Elder Phil said, "I want to thank you both for sharing. That is very honest. It's coming from a good place. You didn't read it in a book, you experienced it. That's very genuine and that's what it's going to take for this circle. To be strong when we are honest, brings things forward. And 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 said, you guys are the teachers, we're all teachers. Nobody, like Heather said, nobody is higher than anybody else in the circle. We are all equal here to have a space, to be able to say how you 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 things, these issues for many, many years in my lifetime. It's happening, It's changing. It's changing in the school system, changing in our whole society. And that's why we're here talking about it. Something is making a change and we're here doing it. We're just tiny particles of it. So again, I want to share that with you guys that 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 a change. And there's going to be other people that are 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 experience and share, building from each other and contributing to a feeling of shared storied experience. For example, one participant observed "seems like mental health is something that's shared by us."

Stories are a powerful medium for conveying knowledge and understanding as we know well through 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 the tradition in education. This one student was telling me that his mother-in-law was she thought there were gaps in his education. So what she did was she invited him to come and learn how to harvest fish, to can fish. And then he went and he spent like all week and there they were counting salmon. And he said at the end of the week he had a whole sense of the history and the origins of a myths and also matriarchy. He was marrying into a matriarchal family. And so he had a whole different worldviews than he 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 stories which are now deep in his heart."

For the participants of this study, improving education and educational experiences require 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 told by 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 as 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 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 postsecondary because they already feel worthless already. So what's the point of even trying and something that looks difficult? It's probably going to be hell. And from an economic perspective, the consequences of that are bad, you know? So like this is something that needs to be done in the long term and needs to be addressed. And it requires more than what post-secondary institutions could provide like honestly, if we're talking about now, say First Nations communities. There's something that Elders need to like, well, like you know, in common, well, not just Elders, but let's say adults in general should try to inspire their kids and the next generations to try and feel like they can do things that seem difficult."

On a micro level, community development within the postsecondary and teaching and learning environments requires taking into account the different sensory needs of class members. One participant's story expressed the barriers that they encounter that disrupt their learning capabilities, e.g. when there's cross talking from other students in the classroom that is not relevant to the teachings or 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 assessments. 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 than the previously failed assignment.

Building communities with Indigenous Autistic learners goes beyond their active citizenship in teaching and learning environments. It goes beyond the individual learner in question and it calls all into the circle. This includes those yet not present and those whose voices are not included. Many Indigenous cultures share a future-facing perspective and ethic that governs what is good for the collective must be good for future generations. One of my Elders, Elder 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 has 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 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 stepping stone 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 Indigenous People, but also neuro- divergent people." They have bestowed a great gift to us now, enter those in the future. We have a 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 celebrates 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 distinct cultural groups in general.

Suggested future directions were shared by one of our participants. And to close our collective story, we'll end with their advice. "I think that in addition, like further experiments can be done to determine what other challenges are, what other problems can be solved or 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 again, like say, maybe even just fear. Measuring someone's ability to problem-solve after they've been scared half to death or something. Experiments in a controlled environment could be helpful. Get the consent of the 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 these pieces together. And to you the listeners for tuning into here and learn from these stories. You are now a part of the collective story. What story will you create?