**Transcript of Thrivival: The Fire Within
13. Thrivival: Self-Identity
Project Lead and Speaker: Heather Simpson**

HEATHER SIMPSON:

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.