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

HEATHER SIMPSON:

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."