

Ke'em Goot

Resonances between the Nisga'a Way and the Compassionate Systems Framework

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Introduction

In the current era of social and environmental breakdowns, advancing compassionate systems change in education, in society and in the minds and hearts of humans, is both timely and essential. Supporting equity and flourishing in education requires approaches that are not only accessible but relational and regenerative, particularly when schooling has been a vehicle for individual and collective trauma – nowhere probably more so, than in First Nations communities around the world. For many, the legacies of residential and Western schooling continue to affect lives, cultures, and relationships.

Experience from Canada and Australia suggests that Compassionate Systems principles and First Nations ways of knowing resonate in meaningful ways, offering opportunities to enhance educational equity, some measure of healing, and address broader societal and environmental challenges.

This report shares insights from dialogues exploring the resonances between the Compassionate Systems Framework and the Nisga'a way. Through several dialogues, we examined how the Compassionate Systems approach can learn from the traditional knowledge, practices, and relational ways of the Nisga'a, with the aim of fostering community, wellbeing, and resilience while supporting broader societal and ecological flourishing.

Methods

An exploration grounded in lived experience

Four exploration sessions were held to inquire into the intersections between the Compassionate Systems approach and the Nisga'a way. Each session lasted between one and one and a half hours and took place virtually. The sessions brought together four Nisga'a co-researchers – “The Jijies” - who as practitioners in diverse educational roles had recently participated in a Compassionate Systems Awareness retreat. Further, the sessions were attended by dialogue partners from the Global Center for Systems Awareness and from the Local British Columbia Centre for Systems Awareness.

Each session began with a check-in and continued with an open exploration process. The Nisga'a co-researchers generously offered their lived experiences as an entry point for this mutual research process, focusing on moments during the Compassionate Systems retreat in which they felt resonance and alignment with the Nisga'a way.

To explore these resonance moments in depth, the dialogues were informed by the micro-phenomenological interview approach (Petitmengin, 2006). In this method, an interviewer supports an interviewee in evoking a significant lived experience and attending to its sensorial and affective details, allowing for rich and detailed accounts to emerge. Through this dialogical, reflective process, the co-researchers collectively constructed an understanding of how the Compassionate Systems Framework, and the Nisga'a way might intersect, inform, and strengthen each other.

Themes

From these dialogues, four central themes emerged, reflecting both personal lived experiences and collective resonance with Nisga'a knowledge. The themes were co-constructed by the researchers and reviewed by the Nisga'a partners, ensuring that the presentation honors the perspectives and authority of the co-researchers.

Reflections highlighted moments of connection that spanned personal, relational, ecological, and spiritual dimensions. Participants described experiences of belonging, connection with ancestral realms, and awareness of being part of something larger than oneself. Each theme below is anchored by a quote that exemplifies the co-researchers' reflections and lived experiences.

“The cold wind strengthens us”: Connectedness with living nature

Nisga'a co-researchers described moments of profound resonance during the Compassionate Systems workshop that emerged through connection with the living environment—land, river, wind, and animals. These moments were described as experiences of alignment, gratitude, and surrender to Mother Nature.

One co-researcher reflected:

“And I see a group of people working with Mother Nature, because we have to work in concert with everything around us. It's not just us. There are other people. There are other elements that come into play, and we have to just surrender to everything, and only do what we can do.”

Another described a vivid moment outdoors by the river, recalling,

“I heard the rush of the rapids in the distance. I heard an eagle, although I couldn't see her. I heard crows. I heard the wind.”

The impact of this embodied encounter with nature was described as cleansing and strengthening:

“When I'm cold, I always have this—I guess shield that I put around myself. But then at that moment I didn't. I felt I didn't need the shield, because I needed to be cleansed by the river, by the wind, the rain, and all that was going on there. I just wanted to stay in that moment, because I know it strengthened me.”

As one co-researcher explained, this cleansing and renewal were deeply spiritual:

“The rain washes away our sadness. The wind takes any negative energy away. And the cold—the cold wind strengthens us. That's how I saw it.”

These moments also evoked a strong sense of belonging and homecoming to the land:

“I just felt like I was home and on really good land. And it brought my mind to peace. I can't explain it, but that's how I felt at the time.”

Connection with nature was inseparable from a sense of ancestral presence:

“As we were walking down towards the river, there were ravens calling ... I know it was our ancestors.”

“You would expect that this is how we live”: Resources in one's cultural and family lineage

The dialogues revealed how the workshop experiences evoked ancestral and familial resources that had long sustained resilience and belonging. Several Nisga'a co-researchers described how moments during the workshop reconnected them with memories of childhood, family teachings, and cultural practices.

For instance, connecting with nature—particularly with the river—was described as a vital cultural resource:

“To us, the river is our livelihood. It’s what we always go to for our food, and just to de-stress ourselves, just to make a connection, just to touch the water. It’s bringing us back into life, to what we once had.”

One co-researcher recalled a childhood experience:

“We were walking up the hill, or the slope, and the sun just—I could just feel this—the heat of the sun on my back. And it brought me right back to many times as a child when we were either harvesting food off the land or processing food from the land.”

Another described how these moments connected her to her late mother’s wisdom and qualities passed through generations, expressed in Nisga’a teachings such as “we have to just surrender to everything and only do what we can do,” “working with nature,” and “not be so hard on oneself.”

For some, reconnecting with these cultural resources also meant remembering how culture provided strength in difficult times:

“Now that I think about it, you know how they say that if a child has experienced a lot of trauma, and if they have one adult in their life to show them their worth... because of all the abuse and binge drinking weekends, it was our culture that was stronger. That held me and allowed me to be okay.”

This reconnection was described as both emotional and embodied:

“In my head, my feet, and my gut... a sense of calm, a groundedness. A sense of being okay, of setting all worries and stressors aside. And that’s huge because I have a lot.”

Another co-researcher added,

“It was nice to go back to that, and like connecting or reconnected with our mom, with the spirit.”

Alongside these personal and cultural resources, many co-researchers expressed a sense of optimism and joy:

“I felt optimistic for the future. Just being in that moment, I felt very optimistic that everything is going to be okay.”

“Exhilaration—that’s the only word that comes to mind. I was just happy to be there. I felt very positive. Just positive.”

Several expressed a wish that such experiences could be woven more naturally into daily life:

“I remember being disappointed that, okay, so we're gonna go here, we're gonna stay there for 20 minutes, then we're gonna go back... but it was beautiful. And just that it's sad that it had to be a practice. And it's not how we are—not only for Indigenous people, but you would expect that this is how we live.”

“I never in a million years would have imagined that I'd be part of something so huge”: Purpose and community

For several Nisga'a co-researchers the sense of connectedness extended beyond the personal to a collective sense of purpose and belonging. Participants expressed humility and pride in contributing to something larger than themselves:

“I never in a million years would have imagined that I'd be part of something so huge. And it's humbling, and it's an honor to be tapped to do this kind of work.”

This experience was tied to both community and ecological purpose:

“We were working towards the greater good — both the people that were at the river that day and the eagles and the rabbits that I heard. To me, I knew that we were working with Mother Nature to get to where we needed to go.”

“I always sense that our ancestors are there with us all the time”: Ancestral and spiritual dimensions

Co-researchers described experiences of guidance, presence, and support from ancestors, linking their workshop experiences to spiritual dimensions of the Nisga'a way. One reflected:

“I always, when I'm there, I always sense that our ancestors are there with us all the time. They were in that conference room with us, and even when we were walking at the various breakout sessions. And I always feel them—they're always with us. And they were surrounding us at that river. To me it just goes without saying. I know that it's there. They're there to guide us and protect us.”

During the workshop, a snake appeared outside of its natural habitat, by the door to the venue – it would have needed to move across asphalt and concrete, out in the open, to get to that spot. One of the co-researchers elucidated what this encounter was conveying to her:

“It was just so relaxing ... I don't know why there would be a snake there, other than being, representing someone from the past, or maybe even an ancestor, or someone just being there to remind us that we're on the right path. ... I think it was there just to say, 'okay, just stay. Continue what you're doing. Just stay on the red road, the road toward being a good human.’”

The “out-of-the-ordinary” encounter with the snake resonated with each person in their own way, yet all experienced it as meaningful and positive:

"The snake appears, and then we're all interpreting our own thoughts with this. And they're all good thoughts, you know, it's all for the good."

Other spiritual practices, such as offering thanks to the land, were particularly meaningful:

"Throwing the cedar on the ground. That really resonated with me, because to me that means we are giving thanks to Mother Earth and Creator."

Some described embodied sensations of ancestral affirmation:

"I feel like when I know the spirits, the ancestors, are agreeing with what I'm saying, I'll get like a lightning bolt through my body. It starts from my head right through to my arms and my legs. And at that moment I knew that what was happening was supported by my ancestors in the spirit world. It's very powerful to have that acknowledgement from the spirit."

"We all need to do our part in the healing journey:" Reconciliation and healing

When asked about the red thread running through her workshop experience, a Nisga'a co-researcher reflected:

"It's all kind of intertwined, like my growing up and the reconciliation thing. I don't think any of my family—well, maybe my cousins—went to the residential schools. But... We're all going through this, the same thing. But in different ways. We're all going through this for a very good reason: We all need to do our part in the healing journey."

This statement conveys a sense of agency, purpose, and responsibility, highlighting that reconciliation and healing are both deeply personal and inherently collective processes. From this perspective, the layers of participants' experiences—ranging from childhood memories and cultural practices, to connection with nature and community, to encounters with ancestral guidance and affirmation—can be seen as facets of an ongoing journey of healing and reconciliation.

The intertwined nature of this healing emerged in several dialogues. For example, a Nisga'a co-researcher described reconnecting with cultural resources despite a challenging childhood. A dialogue partner from the Center for Systems Awareness observed that this reflected a moment of healing both for the individual and the wider community: "It sounds to me when you're describing it, like a moment of healing both the field and yourself... you felt helped by the culture."

These reflections suggest that at the genuine intersection of compassionate systems work and the Nisga'a way, opportunities for reflection, agency and gentle support for

healing can emerge, offering small steps along the ongoing journey of collective reconciliation.

Conclusion

The dialogues confirm meaningful resonance between the Compassionate Systems Framework and the Nisga'a way, highlighting shared principles of relationality, compassion, and attentiveness to interconnected systems. Four key axes of resonance emerged from this exploration:

- Ecological – a profound connection and attunement to living nature and the land.
- Cultural – engagement with ancestral knowledge, practices, and cultural resources that foster resilience.
- Communal – a sense of purpose, belonging, and collaboration within collective action.
- Ancestral/Spiritual – the felt presence of ancestors, offering guidance and grounding the lived experience.

As an initial exploration, these dialogues underscore the importance of continuing and expanding this work, with the goal of deepening mutual learning, supporting First Nations communities, and strengthening educational practices that are relationally and socially regenerative. Integrating insights from First Nations ways of knowing – such as the First Nations Learning Principles of BC

(https://www2.gov.bc.ca/assets/gov/education/kindergarten-to-grade-12/teach/teaching-tools/aboriginal-education/principles_of_learning.pdf)

holds the potential to not only enrich educational practices, but also to foster community wellbeing, advance equity, and contribute to broader societal and ecological flourishing.