

# Yetko and Sophie: Nlakapamux Cultural Professors

*Shirley Sterling*

*University of British Columbia*

---

*This article discusses the goals, processes, content, and successes in an Nlakapamux narrative about education for the purpose of identifying criteria for success in contemporary settings. The most important criterion of success is that of the presence of the cultural experts, in this case the grandmothers Yetko and Sophie, two fine educators.*

## *Yetko, Sophie, and the Fishtrap*

*My academic interest in storytelling began with a fishtrap. In January of 1987 I asked my mother, Sophie, to help me build a Salish fishtrap as a project for a night course on the Native Peoples of British Columbia. As we walked around the chicken house to gather red willow for the project, my mother started to tell me about how her grand-aunt, Yetko, had shown her how to build the trap when my mother was about six or eight years old. They were down at the Coldwater River, one day, gathering plants and making "spetsin" or twine. Sophie showed me how you take some strings from the plant and roll it on your knee to twirl it into twine. Then Sophie said Yetko thought it would be nice to have fresh trout for supper. She gathered red willow and started to make the fishtrap right there. My mother watched for awhile, then she began to hold sticks in place so Yetko could tie them. As they worked together Yetko explained what she was doing, how she was doing it and why she was doing it a certain way. She explained where it was best to place the trap so that fish would go into it and how to hide the trap from the fisheries people who were patrolling the rivers and breaking up the traps. They went up to Yetko's house and told her she was not allowed to make fishtraps anymore. (Sterling, 1992, p. 11)*

*At one point in the building of the fishtrap I stopped to watch my mother. As she was chopping the willow sticks and tying them together with black baling twine she was remembering Yetko and the day at the river gathering twine. My mother was chuckling at something Yetko said or did.*

*"Oh, she was a nice old lady," said Mum.*

*"How many fishtraps have you made, Mum?" I asked.*

*"Two," she said.*

*"I mean in your entire lifetime?"*

*"Well," she said, "This one and the one I made with Yetko."*

*"You mean you remembered how to make a fishtrap from that one time when you were a little girl and Yetko showed you? That's like sixty-five years ago!" I was thinking, wow, sixty-five years later, she remembered!*

In examining accounts of traditional First Nations education, researchers and education philosophers are interested in identifying those approaches, aspects, and/or components that lead to success. In the spirit of *Indian Control of Indian Education* (National Indian Brotherhood, 1972) First Nations educators are keen to examine First Nations educational successes for the purpose of establishing First Nations' criteria for success in contemporary educational settings. The story of Yetko, Sophie, and the fishtrap provides a model for examining the goals, processes, content, and outcomes of traditional Nlakapamux education and helps to identify some criteria for success, the most important being the presence of the grandmothers who are cultural professors. (The Nlakapamux, or Thompson Indians, live along the banks of the Thompson and Fraser Rivers and in the Nicola Valley in the interior of British Columbia.) Their teachings go beyond the acquisition of skills to the deeper philosophical transmissions of Nlakapamux values through oral traditions. Through the genre of *spilaxam*, or personal narrative, the grandmothers demonstrate what it means to live successfully and happily as Nlakapamux people.

The National Indian Brotherhood's (1972) policy paper *Indian Control of Indian Education* articulated the philosophy, goals, principles, and directions that "must form the foundation of any school program for [First Nations] children" (p. iii). The policy states in "Curriculum and Values":

Unless a child learns about the forces which shape him: the history of his people, their values and customs, their language, he will never really know himself or his potential as a human being. Indian culture and values have a unique place in the history of mankind. The Indian child who learns about his heritage will be proud of it. The lessons he learns in school, his whole school experience, should reinforce and contribute to the image he has of himself as an Indian. (p. 9)

The grandmothers are natural teachers because they take care of children. In the narratives they laughed and worked and told stories to little children and rode up into the mountains, were kind, were strict, made twine out of plants, cut willow switches to make the children behave, rocked the babies to sleep. Their creation stories and narratives show the children their unique place in their nation's history and contribute to a positive self image by validating First Nations experiences. Like the grandmothers before us we can create lessons built on experience and storytelling to transmit knowledge and skills, cultural pride, and self confidence.

#### *The Grandmothers*

I had always liked the stories about Yetko. Her full name, *K'wista-yetko*, means waterfall. She was sister to Yapskin Antoine and the daughter of Stanislaus Yapskin and Shushiana. Sophie remembers her:

[Yetko] lived right across the [Coldwater] River. She's Yapskin's [Antoine] sister, that's my mother's aunt. We'd do anything to be with her. She was so wonderful. She learned us how to catch horse, to try and saddle a horse. Then we'd go out digging for roots. We'd go out doing something, pick berries or saskatoons, whatever there was to pick. There were big

baskets on the horse. She shows you what to do, tells you what to do. I think she just enjoys going out that time. I remember that time we followed her up this hill past Tulameen. She was going to get bitterroots up there, way up. Isaac Antoine was on his way down. He stoned some grouse. He says, "Oh I got some food here for you." So he handed them over to my grandmother. She took one out and started plucking it. Then the next thing you know the grouse came alive and flew away into the bushes. She told us, "Run after it and get it!" She was all excited. She couldn't stand to miss one grouse. Oh, I laughed and laughed about that. (Sophie, personal communication, November 1, 1992)

Yetko was my mother's great-aunt and one of two grandmothers who helped to raise my mother and her siblings. Yetko was the storyteller. She called the children to bed every evening and told them the *speta'kl*, or creation stories, as they fell asleep. As storyteller Yetko was thus the tradition-bearer, the teacher of values and morals, and the entertainer. Entering into a Yetko story to construct a fishtrap added a new dimension to storytelling; that of a living story experience. As a little girl Sophie had lived the story with Yetko, becoming part of the story by being there as a hearer and learner. Sophie as Elder had transmitted the story by word of mouth as she relived the experience in another role—that of transmitter of knowledge. She imparted knowledge in the same way she had learned it, by actually building the trap and by telling a story at the same time.

At a deeper level of meaning the story of Yetko and the fishtrap gives me joy, a sense of inclusion. I wonder if she would have liked me too, if she would have said to me, "*Seepetza, wee' ken min deep ... Seepetza, come with us.*" And away we would have gone into the mountains on the chocolate-brown-colored horse called Nkwalepeesht with a mane so long it reached down and touched the earth.

More than everything else the story of Yetko is a personal one. She was my blood kin, an ancestress, a member of my family clan, *nookwa'*, my long lost relative, teacher of my mother whose friendship and presence I can experience through my mother's stories about her. I think about Yetko tending the young women in the moon lodges, teaching the girls the Day-Dawn song at sunrise facing the east, lulling the little children to sleep with her magical stories about Grouse, Bear, Eagle, and Coyote. I have not experienced all these practices personally, only heard about them. I probably romanticize them. But I know through stories that cultural activities took place, openly in traditional times, secretly when federal and provincial laws forbade them.

The grandmother stories are important. Through stories about her, Yetko gives me a sense of who I am as a member of the Yapskin clan. She was a gatherer of medicine food, engaging in berry picking activities that we Nlakapamux women and men still carry on every year.

Sophie's traditional name is *Lheelhetko*, which means a little squirt of water, like a heavy raindrop bouncing off the ground. She was the central figure in my childhood, the nurturer, best friend, defender, healer, teacher, sharer of dreams, and singer of a magical song. We used to sit under the huckleberry bushes together as she told me stories of sasquatches, the little

people, the birds, animals, mountains, the old timers, the grandmothers, the old missionary priest called Father Lejeune, and so many more. She told me a story one day about Ice and Chinook that eventually led to me into a doctoral program at the University of British Columbia.

Every evening in summer, after supper, Sophie and I went outside and sat on the steps of the verandah. While she rolled her one cigarette of the day I slapped at mosquitoes and drank sweet tea and she told me about her dreams. She hoped that Dad would build what she called a lean-to, a small room to make more space in the house. She hoped we could get electricity and running water and a new washing machine run by electricity and not gasoline. She thought it would be so nice if she could learn to speak Chinook. I told her of the books I would write one day and the buckskin horse I wanted my dad to buy me.

Sophie was a fluent speaker of Nlakapamux-chin and an expert in plant medicine. She mostly taught by example, and storytelling. She took her children and grandchildren and great-grandchildren into the hills to pick berries and gather roots, mushrooms, and medicine tea of every description: wild rose petals for fragrance, honeysuckle for headache, Labrador tea for almost everything, and wild valerian for sadness. After Dad died she showed the young boys the cultural locations in the valley where Grandpa Albert's hunting spots were and taught them how properly to handle their game, from preparing for the hunt to storing the meat for winter. To waste one ounce of food was shamefully wrong. To leave a wounded animal to suffer and die alone was an act of murder. To take care of the land and territory was to take care of yourself and your relatives and descendants.

Sophie's children and grandchildren continue to engage in the activities she role-modeled and taught. Hunting and fishing and gathering activities are followed rigorously through each season, providing sustenance, social coherence, learning, and teaching. She insisted on having one family gathering per month to celebrate all the birthdays and a gala celebration with extended family and friends to honor the high school and university degrees obtained. She taught us whatever we wanted to know: the language, the creation stories, the family history, the prayers, dances, and drum songs. Through example she imparted her love of sewing, reading, visitors, sunsets, and birdsongs. She wanted the family to be decent and self-sufficient and to take care of people, especially children. At her funeral in September 2001, Sophie was recognized as one of the 80 great people in the history of our nation.

Yetko and Sophie in the fishtrap story are, therefore, still teaching, and the story about them is a living tradition because they are alive in the memories and living words of the storyteller. Whether the story is transmitted by word of mouth or in written form, the experiences they allow us to have are in the present, because as hearers we are in the present. By following the Nlakapamux customs in the Nlakapamux language, Yetko

and Sophie were maintaining the values of family and sharing as they provided food and household goods for the family. With just a knife and the plants around her by the river and her know-how, Yetko demonstrated to Sophie how to gather twine from plants, how to construct the fishtrap, and how to use it to catch trout for supper.

Sophie's teachings give us insights about fish psychology and about the egalitarian nature of the grandmother-child relationship and about the values of family and sharing. Sophie taught me about the Nlakapamux technology for making string and twine that was called *spetsin*, where to find the twine plant at the Coldwater River, and how to store it by rolling it up a certain way. Sophie's good teaching also enabled me to pass my university transfer course and provided me with valuable insights for First Nations educational theory and practice.

The teaching continues. Many decades later we still go to the family places for the abundance provided by our territory and engage in the thanksgiving rituals we learned later in life. Like the grandmothers before us we take the children and praise them for their efforts.

#### *Goals of Nlakapamux Education*

Certainly one of the major goals of Nlakapamux education is the transmission of cultural knowledge, including the values of family and sharing (Robert Sterling, 1984). The land provided food and shelter, and Nature was the textbook, providing the content for Nlakapamux learning. Cultural knowledge provided the wisdom for establishing a healthy relationship with the environment and the processes for making a living from the land, then transmitting that knowledge to the next generation. The result was self-sufficiency, and also community-sufficiency because the hunting-gathering lifestyle requires a high degree of cooperation. In a territory of hot summers and cold winters, providing sustenance had to be a daily necessity. Already at a young age Sophie was ready to cooperate and help Yetko build the fishtrap. She did not wait to be asked. She simply watched for a while then held the sticks so that her grandmother could lash them together.

#### *Processes, Content, and Outcomes of Nlakapamux Education*

The processes of Nlakapamux education as demonstrated in the fishtrap story include storytelling, learning with the family and community, learning from lived experience, learning by example and learning from the land that is the provider of sustenance and resources.

Storytelling provides both method and content. Content includes anything from the natural environment, cultural and technological knowledge, information, values, and history. Method includes storying as a mnemonic device and as a process of transmitting cultural knowledge and values by word of mouth from generation to generation. Yetko took Sophie to the river where she gathered twine from the plants, then made a

fishtrap. When she left there, Sophie knew a good location for dogbane, how to gather it and store it, how to build a trap using the twine, how to place the trap, how to hide the trap, and how to transmit the knowledge by demonstration and by storytelling. Telling the story many decades later helped her to remember all the relevant details of the day with Yetko.

Some of the successful outcomes of the building of the fishtrap were the acquisition of knowledge and skills, the transmission of values, cultural knowledge and adaptability, the health, well-being, and survival of the Nlakapamux people. We can see that Yetko was a good teacher. Sophie not only gained the knowledge and skills to be able to build the trap, but she remembered the skill for over 60 years. They did not know at the time that Sophie would grow up to marry a fine fisherman and that their sons, grandsons, and great-grandsons would also be good fishers. Sophie would, therefore, only need to build one more fishtrap in her lifetime, six decades later to help her daughter obtain success in a new educational process, that of completing a university transfer course. Obtaining a university degree in turn provides the potential for employment and self-sufficiency. The current usage of the knowledge points to the adaptability of Nlakapamux knowledge. A traditional activity can transform from a culturally contextualized setting to a contemporary one that meets the same need for self-sufficiency, but in a different way.

### *Conclusions*

Four aspects of the fishtrap story seem to provide especially important educational criteria for teaching Nlakapamux children. First, Yetko and Sophie provided good role-modeling using storytelling and hands-on experience to help them remember details about the construction of the fishtrap. Theory (storytelling) and concrete practice work together well. Second, Sophie was able to remember from that one time how to make a trap 65 years later. Stories are mnemonic devices that help us to remember events for many decades. Third, Sophie maintained a lifelong proficiency in and love for the activities she participated in with Yetko: berrypicking, storytelling, gathering food, and gathering herbal medicines. Learning should be enjoyable, and a good teacher makes it so. Fourth, the relationship between Yetko and my mother was egalitarian rather than hierarchical. She described Yetko as friend (field notes).

However, there was much more in the fishtrap narrative, many more layers of meaning. There are social, economic, political, psychological, educational, historical, and legal elements in the story, all of which have potential for education. For example, when my mother was a little girl in the 1920s, institutional racism had invaded the everyday lives of the Nlakapamux in the form of fisheries laws. The story, then, points at an economic dilemma. What were the Nlakapmux to eat? The story reveals how political domination took the form of oppressive laws against First Nations fishing practices, and in this way tried to force the Nlakapamux

and other First Nations to change their economic traditions. The story also shows there was a resistance movement in that the grandmothers were teaching the children to hide the fishtraps from the fisheries officers.

Whatever stories I hear about Yetko and the other grandmothers inform me about my culture because they lived the culture, and they continue to transmit that culture by whatever they do and say in the stories. They remain alive in the present tense of the stories, reviving, restoring, and revitalizing what has been lost for a while: cultural identity. The stories and the grandmothers and aunts and uncles and dads and siblings and cousins and friends who tell them to us are really important in the transmission of culture and cultural pride and the sense of inclusion they give us. Through them the cultural professors continue to nurture, inform, teach and guide us.

#### *Acknowledgment*

This article is an adaptation of Chapter Six of my doctoral dissertation *The Grandmother Stories: Oral Tradition and the Transmission of Culture* (1997).

#### *References*

- National Indian Brotherhood. (1972). *Indian control of Indian education*. Ottawa: Author.
- Sterling, S.A. (1997). *The grandmother stories: Oral tradition and the transmission of culture*. Unpublished doctoral dissertation, University of British Columbia.
- Sterling, S.A. (1992). *My name is Seepeetza*. Vancouver, BC: Groundwood.