Passing the Torch: Collaborating to Create a Legacy

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How It Began

It was the Spring of 2022 and I stood in my beautiful School Library Learning Commons (SLLC) with a great sigh, knowing that this would be the last time I set up a "Forest of Reading", Canada's largest recreational reading program, "*Which Title Will Get Your Vote*?" display in this space (Ontario Library Association, 2022). After four years, it had been transformed from top to bottom from a dusty old library to a revitalized SLLC, meticulously organized with a fresh coat of paint, updated shelving, and a diversified collection. This space was my pride and joy. It had been a true labour of love. Now it was time to move on to a new challenge. I had already made the decision to look for a new teacher-librarian (TL) posting, and I was getting ready to interview for new opportunities within my board. The idea that I would be passing this library on to another TL was both exciting and daunting.

I was keenly aware of the turnover rate for TLs within our board. Anecdotal accounts suggest that one-third to one-half of the TLs in my school board are new to the role each year. This meant that there was a strong likelihood that the TL that would take over for me could be a first-year TL, new to both the school and the role. This would mean that the depth of information needed to be shared would be vastly different than if it were a seasoned TL. There was no way of being sure of the outcome. As anyone in education knows, the one thing we can be certain of in staffing is that changes are certain.

I started thinking about what information needed to be shared and started asking around. Was there a template? Had anyone seen anything? Did any such thing exist? The answer was a resounding no. So I went to social media. Very conveniently, several other seasoned TLs in the Twitter #onted and #ONSchoolLibrary community were also leaving their schools (or had recently) and were happy to share what they had written for their successors. This would serve to help me, but this still left me worried for our own board due to the consistent rate of turnover in our own libraries. Knowing how many TLs were new to the role every year, it was becoming clearer that a guiding document that left key information behind for incoming TLs could be transformational in terms of providing much-needed support. Experience had taught me that a lot of anxieties for incoming TLs revolve around unknowns and unanswered questions - much of which might be solved by having outgoing TLs leave a few simple notes. If given a template to follow (i.e., to know what information was key to pass along) this process could be made a whole lot easier and relieve a lot of stress for a lot of people.

Switching assignments as a teacher is a big change and often fraught with anxiety. Changing from one grade to another can be difficult, especially if you are changing between divisions. However, the essence of classroom teaching remains: figuring out classroom management, pulling grade-specific curriculum resources, and putting together a classroom routine. Switching assignments to becoming a teacher-librarian is a whole different ball game. While you are still teaching, the teaching may now look very different (i.e., co-teaching/partnering). “Teacher-librarians have the specialized skills, knowledge, and training to implement needed change” (Canadian School Libraries, 2022). In this way, TLs are often considered leaders in their school communities, which means taking on a leadership role from a new perspective. Furthermore, there is the management of the library itself, which is a whole new job separate and apart from the teaching aspect of being a TL. This is very school-specific, however, and can vary widely between locations depending on the size of the collection, available volunteers, and structures or routines established. Regardless, this is a mammoth and time-consuming aspect of the role, including collection management, collection development, and tech management/support, unique to TLs and often not well understood by colleagues and administrators who often see it simply as “shelving books”. All of this in combination becomes a lot to take on when you are new to the role. There is a lot to wrap your head around in terms of understanding the role itself, how it relates to the rest of the school community, and how it will work with the schedule you’ve been given - all of which are specific to each school.

In my Board, we have a small number of dedicated volunteers who are seasoned TLs that form a group of Teacher-Librarian Mentor Leaders. We meet several times a year to brainstorm ways in which we can support TLs across the system, including providing leadership at a New TL Training Day in August, and in a series of Network Meetings several times a year. At one of these TL Mentor Leader meetings in March 2022, over the course of our often lively conversation, I asked if there was a template for a transition document meant to support TLs leaving their schools. When it was determined that no such template existed, I spoke about the need for one, citing the turnover rate and acknowledging the amount of institutional information that we hold as individual TLs. New TLs need information that is separate and apart from the knowledge needed to do our roles specific to being a school library worker (e.g., circulation software knowledge, Board purchasing policies, etc.) that might be gained through a training workshop. A lively and fruitful discussion ensued where it was determined that yes, a template would definitely be helpful and warranted, and yes, there were several colleagues that would be happy to help me develop one.

Brainstorming

Using Google docs and Zoom, I met a couple of weeks later on April 11, 2022, with three TL colleagues: Lisa Lewis, Karen Devonish-Mazzotta, and Cindy Van Wonderen. Together, we brainstormed the various headings we believed would be necessary to include in any school library transition document. It was fairly easy to come up with the myriad of issues, knowledge, and information that we as teacher-librarians hold within our heads that is specific to our local schools. What was most surprising to us, was not how easy it was to come up with these headings, but rather how long this list became. If nothing else, it further confirmed for us all the need for such a document to exist to help departing TLs with downloading the extensive knowledge base they

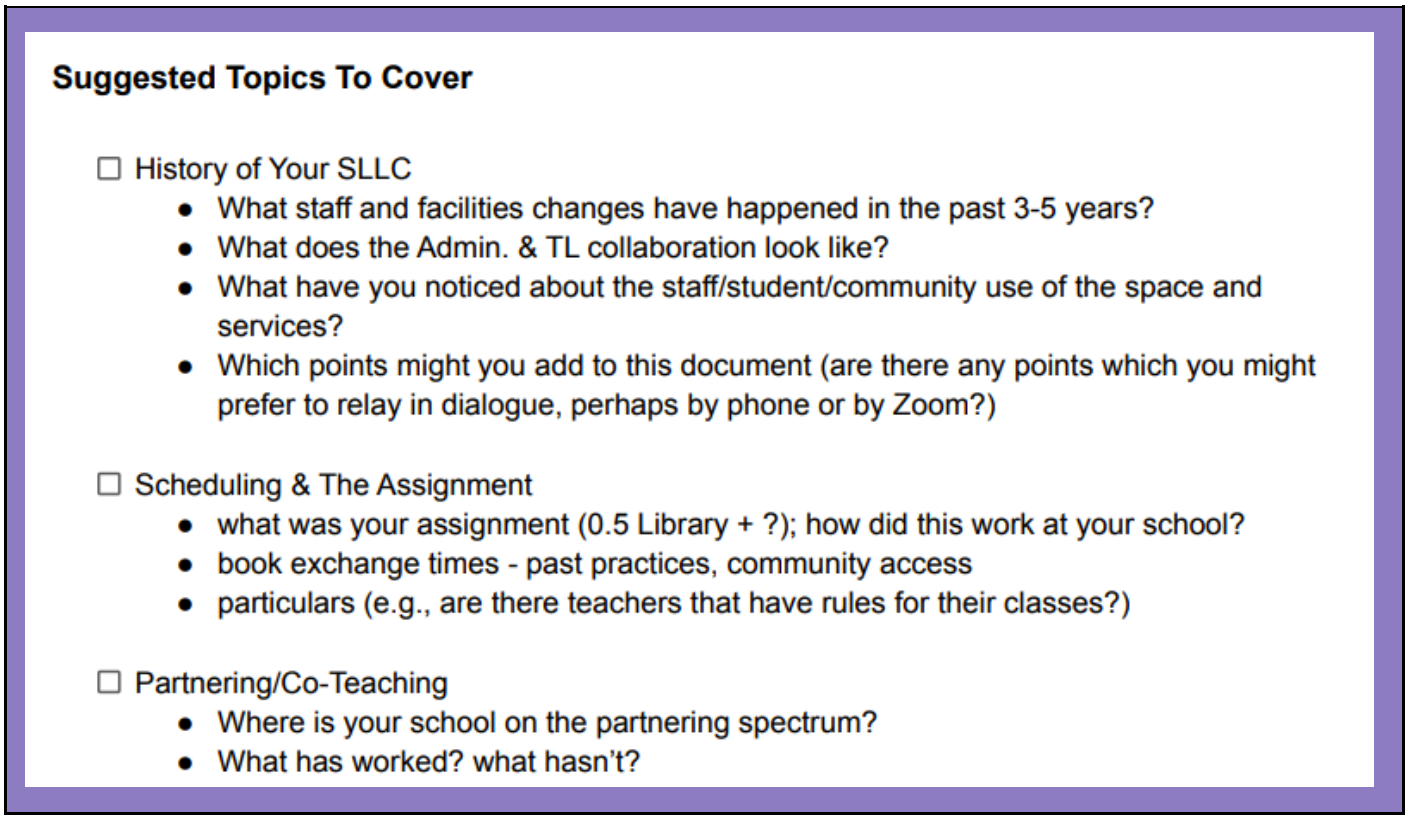
possess. This template could help ensure the continued success of the SLLC in question, as a matter of sustainability of contributions to date and continuity of service for the school community. There were simply too many unknowns without it.

The original brainstormed topics included the following:

- Collection Development (plan, budget)
- Purchasing (vendors - who, why, logistics, budget)
- Collection Management/Organization (what's where & why, shelving, furniture, labelling, major work that has occurred - e.g., inventory, weeding, shelf purchased, etc)
- Dual Track School / International Languages / Special Programmes
- Programming / Curriculum
- Scheduling
    - particular rules - e.g., which teachers have rules for their classes such as their students can only take out books at their own reading levels
    - Book Exchange times - past practices, community access
- Volunteers - students, parents/community members (who knows? who can help?)
- Partnering/Co-Teaching - where are we on the spectrum?
- Book Fair practices and processes
- Where to Find: labels, book bags, book repair supplies, bookends, shelving labels, cataloguing supplies (bar codes, spine labels, spine covers, genre labels, school stamp, etc.)
- What's outstanding?
    - Book orders, invoices, etc.
- History at Your School
    - Events
    - Author Visits
    - Book Fairs (Scholastic Password)
    - Budget History (last 2-3 years)
    - Online Licences & Access Codes/Passwords
    - Magazines Subscriptions
    - Forest of Reading Participation
    - Donations/Fines?

The conversation then turned to organization. What format would make the most sense? I had come clean with my colleagues and let them know that the purpose of this exercise had been entirely self-serving for me as I was planning to leave my post at my school and move on to a new school. This template's maiden voyage would be with me as I used it to download all of my knowledge of my current SLLC for whoever was to take over the library. In writing my own version, it became clear that this would be beneficial for several reasons. First, it meant that our purposes for doing all this work were practical and timely. Second, it meant that as I wrote my transition document, I would be able to add to the template as I realized there were topics we may have forgotten in our brainstorming. And thirdly, it meant that there were likely to be pieces of information

that were relevant, and perhaps even important to be passed along, but also not appropriate for publication - but better communicated in person or in a conversation rather than being put on paper. And it was good to be able to also convey this within the scope of the template.



Suggested Topics To Cover

☐ History of Your SLLC
- What staff and facilities changes have happened in the past 3-5 years?
- What does the Admin. & TL collaboration look like?
- What have you noticed about the staff/student/community use of the space and services?
- Which points might you add to this document (are there any points which you might prefer to relay in dialogue, perhaps by phone or by Zoom?)

☐ Scheduling & The Assignment
- what was your assignment (0.5 Library + ?); how did this work at your school?
- book exchange times - past practices, community access
- particulars (e.g., are there teachers that have rules for their classes?)

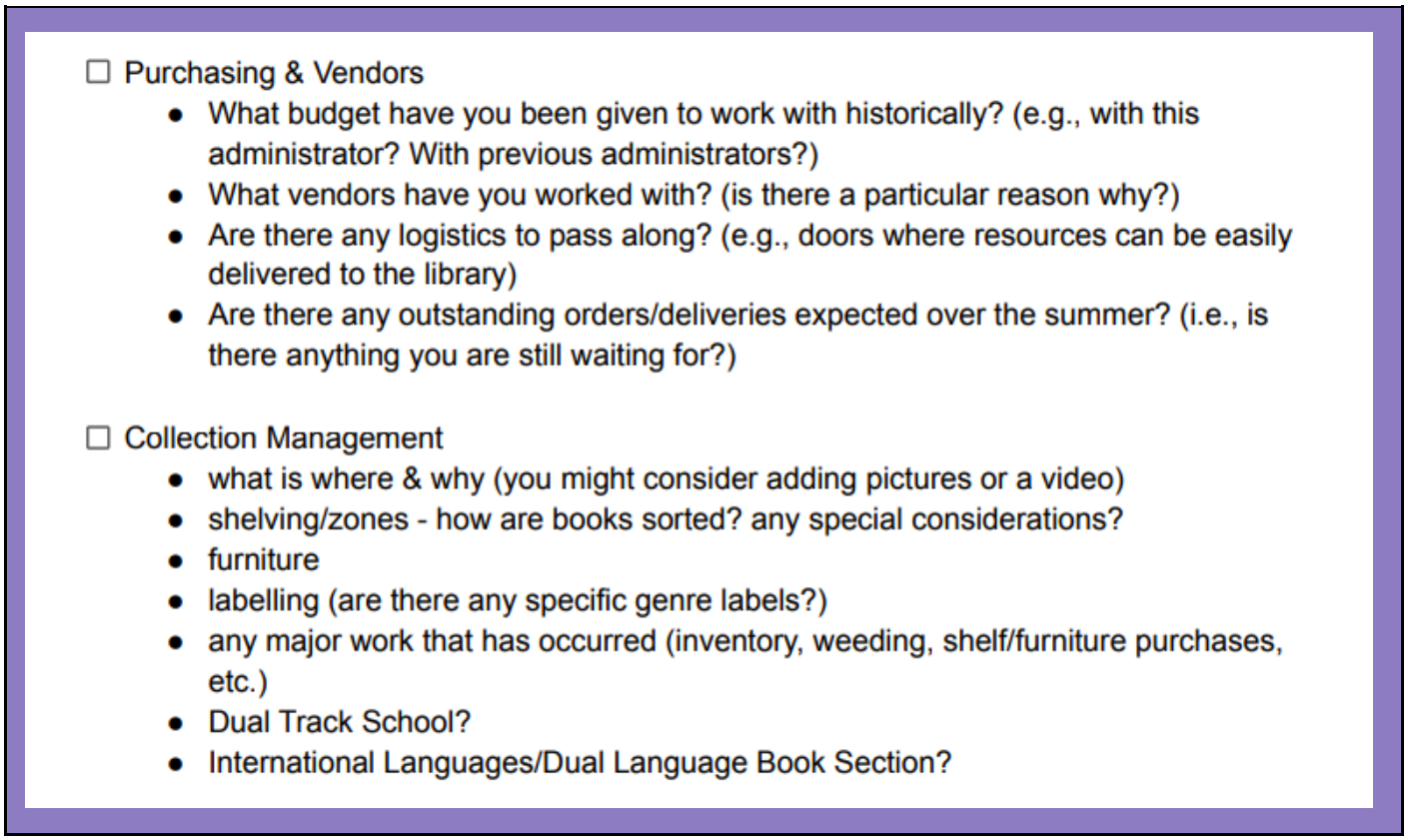
☐ Partnering/Co-Teaching
- Where is your school on the partnering spectrum?
- What has worked? what hasn't?

Image: Screenshot of part of the transition template with SubTitle: "Suggested Topics to Cover" and topics listed underneath including "History of Your SLLC, Scheduling and The Assignment, and Partnering/Co-Teaching

As I sat down to start the process of pulling out all the bits and pieces of information buried deep in my hippocampus, I was immediately grateful for the guidance that our brainstorming had provided. While the finished piece was inevitably edited to be reordered and reorganized for clarity several times over, the list of topics that we'd developed provided a baseline from which to work that proved to be incredibly useful for keeping me on track. As I attempted to commit all this institutional knowledge to paper, I found myself to be a proverbial library mouse: running from stack to stack, book to book, desperate to be sure I didn't leave a single crumb of information behind. Wanting to make sure I covered everything and constantly looking over my shoulder with anxious glances to worry about what I'd surely forgotten.

The other support that the brainstormed list gave me was a map of what I needed to be thinking about for this transition document. The reality of my school year was such that the actual writing of my transition document didn't occur until much later in the spring (late May, early June), which was partly a function of being busy with other projects, partly a reality of what was going on within my school days at that time, and partly because I was daunted by the task. However, my procrastination was - at the same time - an unexpected gift. It gave me the time to think about what I was going to write. As I went through my day, many times it would spark new thoughts about something that would need to be added to the "list". Speaking with other colleagues, who at this

point knew about my new role in another school and the transition document project, helped me consider how to frame another aspect of something very school-specific information that would need to be worded delicately.



☐ Purchasing & Vendors

- What budget have you been given to work with historically? (e.g., with this administrator? With previous administrators?)
- What vendors have you worked with? (is there a particular reason why?)
- Are there any logistics to pass along? (e.g., doors where resources can be easily delivered to the library)
- Are there any outstanding orders/deliveries expected over the summer? (i.e., is there anything you are still waiting for?)

☐ Collection Management

- what is where & why (you might consider adding pictures or a video)
- shelving/zones - how are books sorted? any special considerations?
- furniture
- labelling (are there any specific genre labels?)
- any major work that has occurred (inventory, weeding, shelf/furniture purchases, etc.)
- Dual Track School?
- International Languages/Dual Language Book Section?

Image: Screenshot of part of the transition template with headings that include Purchasing & Vendors & Collection Management

In the final version, the Collection Management section comprised more than a third of the document. This makes sense as SLLCs are most unique when it comes to how the collections are organized - and this is all in the hands of the TLs that establish those systems for their libraries.

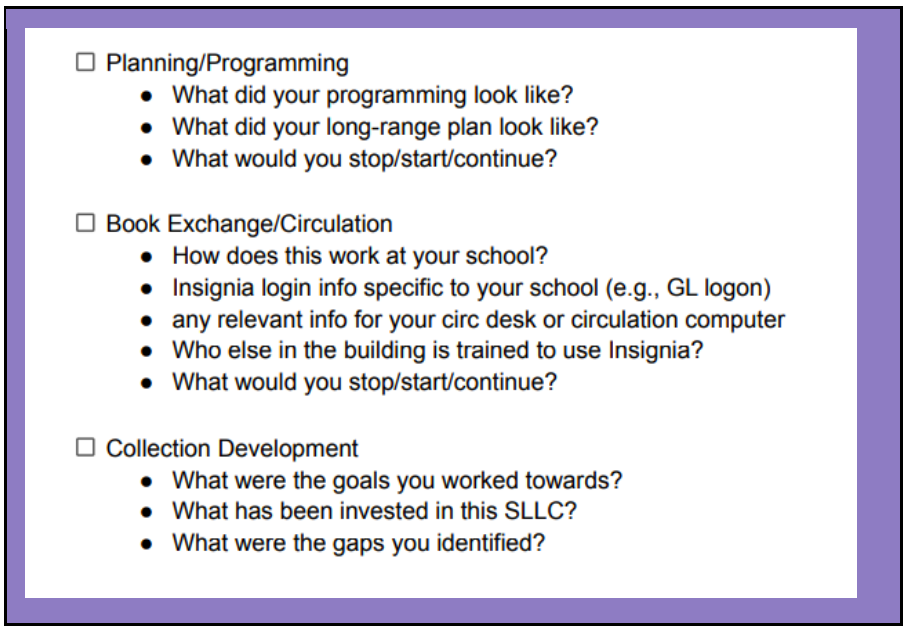


Image: Screenshot of part of the transition template with headings that include Planning/Programming, Book Exchange/Circulation & Collection Development

Writing the Doc

The final version of my transition document totalled almost nine pages. It came to pass that my principal hired a dear TL friend to become my successor. This meant my beloved SLLC was going to be passed along into the hands of a seasoned TL, and one I knew well. As such, the tone of my transition document became much friendlier and more casual than it might have been had I been writing for a different audience (i.e., a stranger or first-year TL).

Collection Development

In the spring of 2018, I received support from Library Learning Resources to address a number of collection-related issues and we did a massive weed of the collection. At the time, the average age was 1996 and there were about 8,000 copies here. We removed more than half. The winner was a 1940 original edition of *The Country Noisy Book* by Margaret Wise Brown. I kept it - it's on the blue shelf in your office.

I have worked hard to update this collection and always with an equity lens. I believe fervently that every student deserves to see themselves reflected in every aspect of their intersectional identity in story. And that my job, as the teacher-librarian, is to know this community and our learners so that I can source these stories. My favourite moments have been when I see students enter the library, look at a book and say, "that looks like me!" This collection now has 7863 titles (30.2 copies per student) and I can confidently say that it is reflective of our O'Connor community.

In rebuilding the collection, I have specifically sought to fill the following gaps:

- Indigenous voices
- 2SLBGTQA+ voices
- CRRP - (i.e., stories with BIPOC characters that are also written by BIPOC authors)
- stories that reflect cultures & experiences of marginalized communities (e.g., providing students with the opportunity to see themselves reflected in "mirrors", the opportunity to see the experience of others through "windows" & the opportunity to walk through "sliding glass doors" into the imaginary worlds created in fictional settings)

Image: Screenshot of part of the final transition document from the first part of the section on Collection Development

The composition of the transition document was made easier when the incoming TL had the opportunity to come and visit the SLLC twice before the end of the year, giving us the chance to do three things: one, chat in person about many, many things that I did not put down on paper; two, being together in person in the SLLC space allowed me to "show" and not just "tell" them about a number of details; and three, it gave them an occasion to ask me questions - a fortuitous time that gave both of us time to ask and answer queries and concerns that helped alleviate many anxieties on both sides.

Image: Picture of the read-aloud area and picture book shelving at the O'Connor P.S. SLLC

In the last edition of "What's Happening @ Your Library Learning Commons", the monthly newsletter for TLs in the Toronto District School Board, our brainstorming team was asked if it would be okay to include a link to our template, titled "Passing The Torch: TL Transition Template". (See Appendix A) It was agreed we would provide a link, with the caveat that it would be a "living document", giving us the opportunity to update it as necessary.

What's Happening @ Your Library Learning Commons

Final Issue 2022

Our newsletter for sharing news, information and professional learning resources supporting the work of Library Learning Commons in the TDSB. Join our community or visit our website for more.

Dear Teacher-Librarians and Friends of School Libraries,
As we wind down this school year, we want to thank you for all you have done this year to re-establish TDSB Library Learning Commons as the heart of your school communities. The programs, collections and spaces you curate respond to and support your communities in so many incredible ways. We feel so fortunate to have learned from and worked alongside so many of you over this past year.
Please be sure to read the farewell messages from our colleagues that are retiring at the end of this message. Their perspective on our collective work is inspiring, reflective and thoughtful. Sending you very best wishes for summer months that nourish, restore and revitalise you and looking very much forward to new beginnings in September.

Andrea, Rebecca, Agnieszka and the entire LLR team

Teacher- Librarian News

Leaving Your LLC ?	A group of Teacher-Librarian Facilitators have developed a resource to support communication between outgoing and incoming Teacher-Librarians. If this is you, check out this resource: Passing the Torch for ideas and suggestion of information you might want to pass on. Thank you to Wendy Burch Jones, Cindy Van Wonderen, Karen Devonish-Mazzotta and Lisa Lewis for your leadership on this.

Image: Screenshot of part of the "What's Happening @ Your Library Learning Commons" from June 2022 that references the Passing the Torch transition template document and the team that worked on it

Images: picture book shelving (left) and graphic novel shelving (right) at the O'Connor P.S. SLLC

History

- When I came into the role in 2018-19, the library had been run by a very seasoned TL who had retired the year previous after being in the library for many, many years; he was, by his own admission "not so great with the books" and the collection was not in good shape (average age was 1995) and the space was quite a mess (i.e., cluttered, messy, full of "relics" like encyclopedias from the '80s)
- In the four years since I have completely revitalized the space from a dusty library to a vibrant SLLC → the average age is now 2011, the collection has been well-weeded, is current (nearly 20% of items were published in 2019 or newer), and is reflective of our O'Connor community (i.e., was purchased with an equity lens - considering which voices were on our shelves and which ones were missing); all shelving on the floor is new and movable (on wheels) so you can rearrange to your liking and as of this June, there are two new spinner shelving units to help house new Early Chapter books and more graphic novels
- Additionally, the carpet was changed in 2019, and the walls have been freshly painted in the fall of 2021
- With all these changes, I believe the library space itself (including the collection) is in the best possible shape I can leave it for you
- When I moved into the library from the classroom, the principal and I were clear that there was a need to change the culture of reading in the school community (which at the time was severely lacking based on circulation data, EQAO scores, DRA scores, report cards, and additional anecdotal evidence (e.g., the state of classroom libraries, use of the book room, etc.); in alignment with our SIP, it was decided that my role would be primarily focused on improving our culture of reading within the O'Connor community to the best of my ability - through my roles as the TL, Literacy Lead & POR

The Journey Continues

I am proud of the work we've done on this project to date. Our goal when we started, was to create a template that could serve to assist our TLs in "passing the torch" when they left their SLLCs. I believe we've done that. We also have started to curate a collection of samples from other school library workers from the #onted and #ONSchoolLibrary communities and beyond. It is our intention to work on pulling these together in a single location within our TDSB library learning resources website as a resource for other TLs.

My own transition document ended up as a nine-page letter to a dear friend about a space I knew well and about which I was happy to share candidly due to the level of trust that has been established between us over a 20+ year friendship. That being said, my own "example" will need to be heavily redacted before it can be likewise included among the others.

Of course, my journey now sees me embarking on this whole process from the other side as an incoming TL to a huge library that needs some attention. The last four years have seen three different TLs in the space, including one year of being closed altogether - as were all elementary SLLCs across the TDSB in 2020-21. It is, understandably, a bit of a mess. In the first days of September, I have already managed to weed a number of titles from the shelves, most between 20-30 years old. I have a clear mandate from the admin team to help our school community reimagine this space. What do we want this SLLC to be? It is exciting, albeit daunting, knowing the

age of the collection and the work that lies ahead both in terms of the physical space and the collection development that will be needed to give students the opportunity to see themselves reflected in print in every aspect of their intersectional identity - as they rightfully deserve to be.

Realistically, as any TL comes into a new SLLC they will have to balance understanding past practices and existing structures and routines with whatever new changes they deem necessary to make the space workable for both themselves and the school community. Sometimes the very reason a new TL is brought in is to make changes and change can be good. That being said, when there is an established vision that is working, or a detailed collection development plan it bears mentioning that when a lot of time and effort has gone into planning and budgeting, an incoming TL is wise to do some due diligence in determining what tweaking they may or may not undertake.

Luckily, I will be able to pull on my experience, unlike many first-year TLs who will be in similar situations (brand new to the school), but without the benefit of practice and skill in the role. I am reassured knowing that our Board works hard to provide these new TLs with great training, and a strong and lively TL Network, led by a team of TL Mentor Leaders (including myself) that will do our best to support them. Meanwhile, I have some books to reshelve and a whole new library to reimagine. As it has become apparent, I like the order and structure of having something with which to guide me as I take on big tasks. My next step is to consider what it might look like to put together a document to help me with the process of this revitalization. Maybe someday it will prove helpful for a fellow TL, too.

Appendix A
Link to the TDSB TL Transition Document "Passing The Torch: TL Transition Template".

References

Canadian School Libraries (CSL). (2022). *Leading Learning: Standards of Practice for School Library Learning Commons in Canada*. Retrieved from https://llsop.canadianschoollibraries.ca

Ontario Library Association. (2022). *Welcome to the Forest of Reading.* Retrieved from https://forestofreading.com/about-the-forest/