

Developing a Locally Focused Indigenous Peoples Collection: An Act of Reconciliation

By Andrea LaPointe

Dear Colleagues,

I am writing to you to share a story about a year long journey I have been on. I am thankful to have not been on it alone but rather to have been joined with thoughtful and caring colleagues who made the journey richer. In reflection the journey chose me, and I hope it will choose you to be a part of it in some way too.

This story starts by acknowledging the immense privilege that I have as a descendent of European settlers to live on the unceded traditional territory of the Kwantlen First Nation and to be writing this letter in the peace and safety of my home on this land. I love to take walks here and enjoy the beauty of the earth, the trees, the river and all the life that they feed. When I am quiet, that life becomes like a song that prompts me to breathe deeply to embrace the joyful energy. It so easily clears my head, calms my body and brings me to a place of gratitude for this place I humbly call my home. I reflect on my desire to walk in a good way on this land. I have a lot to learn about how to so do and begin by committing to never taking more than I need, a lesson learned from Robin Wall Kimmerer in her story *Braiding Sweetgrass* (Kimmerer).

I also commit to learning more about this land through its history, its people and their relationship to the land. As a teacher-librarian the power of story is central to my work and learning so I seek out the stories of Indigenous people to teach me. About story itself, I have learned that the Sto:lo people, which include the Kwantlen, write in a cyclical, repetitive and center focused way unlike our European structure of introduction, body and conclusion (Kaminski). This letter I am writing to you is an exercise in telling a story in the cyclical, repetitive and center focused way of the Sto:lo Nation. The center being the journey.

I have also come to learn that this land was stolen and the way in which it was stolen from the Indigenous people involves genocide, abuse, violence, unfulfilled promises and dehumanizing. I didn't learn this part of history in my schooling. As I read, it became very clear to me that I had a lot of unlearning to do. The catalyst for this learning was the 2021 report of the 215 unmarked graves of Indigenous children found on the grounds of the Kamloops Indian Residential School that woke me up to learn a history I didn't know (Dickson and Watson). Yes colleagues, only a year and a half ago did I start to learn about how our country Canada was truly built. Instead of feeling shame about this late understanding, I have decided to put that energy into reconciliation in the forms of learning and action. As more unmarked graves of children were found across the country I felt only further compelled to learn through the stories of

Indigenous people about their experience, their culture, their ways of knowing and the impact of colonialism. I am grateful to have found [books, podcasts, articles](#) and opportunities to hear oral stories shared by Indigenous people.

During this learning, two constants kept presenting themselves to me. The first, the deep gracious and gentle spirit of the storyteller. The second, the deep gratitude held for their land and their people. Both truly beautiful and admirable in contrast to the horrific way the Indigenous people have been, and still are, treated. The posture of Indigenous people continues to teach and compel me to action in both my personal and professional life and I hope to do so with the same grace, gentleness and gratitude. As a teacher-librarian I have identified a couple specific ways to intentionally pursue reconciliation through my work.

One such way is thinking about how Indigenous stories and knowledge are hosted in our collections. I am thankful to teacher-librarians Amanda Barnes and Leigh Husieff for bringing the problematic way in which Indigenous resources are currently catalogued and organized in our collections along my path.

Currently in my district, non-fiction Indigenous resources are being catalogued based on publisher recommended subject headings in the Dewey Decimal Classification System (DDCS) while fiction is classified alphabetically. This means that titles such as *Cloudwalker* by Roy Henry Vickers and Robert Budd are found with fairy tales like Hans Christian Anderson's *The Ugly Duckling*. The picture books, regardless of being fiction or nonfiction, are being catalogued as easy fiction. For example, *When I was Eight the true story of Margaret Pokiak-Fenton* is found with the fictional picture books in easy fiction organized in alphabetical order. In conversation with Indigenous helping teacher, Cheryl Corrick, I learned that even the alphabet is a colonial structure that Indigenous people would not have used to communicate or share their stories and knowledge. In fact, the English alphabet may not have been present on this land until English was first spoken here in the 17th century (Boberg and Cooper).

Amanda and Leigh had begun the work of decolonizing Indigenous stories that were being catalogued under the 398.2 Fiction and Fairy Tales section of the Dewey Decimal Classification System (DDCS). They created a list of 178 such titles that were currently catalogued in 398.2 in our various district collections. Next, they looked to find a more respectful place within the DDCS for each title. As they did, a feeling of frustration grew as well as a concern that this just wasn't the right direction to go. Amanda and Leigh brought me into the conversation, and we quickly realized we would not be decolonizing Indigenous stories and knowledge by moving them within the DDCS. We also realized that the books found in 398.2 were not the only Indigenous books being held in a colonial structure. So the journey took a turn to decolonizing all the Indigenous stories and knowledge books hosted in our collections.

At this point we had more questions than direction, so I took time to record what we needed to know to keep going. Where do we move Indigenous stories and knowledge? What are our goals in doing so? What are others doing and why?

I am thankful to have found some writing on this topic already. Tyler Chawner, a University of Alberta MLIS student, on his website *Decolonizing Classification* summarizes, “Though not often considered by library users, classification systems play a crucial role in meaning making within libraries. The most popular classification systems are often predicated on colonial ways of thinking which subjugate Indigenous ideas in favor of Eurocentric epistemologies.” I think an aspect of the meaning making that Chawner is referring to is the messages sent to our users, our students, about the people represented in the books. Now that we are aware of Indigenous stories and knowledge being currently hosted within colonial systems, we need to remove them to reflect our respect and support for our first people restoring their culture, identity and appreciation for sharing their stories and knowledge with us. In my opinion, anything shy of action would be an implicit act of continuing to impose colonialism through the meaning making messages this inaction would send to students. Indigenous stories and knowledge must be organized and hosted in a new way in our collections.

To begin, we needed to establish our goals and methods. The most important method was, and still is, to center Indigenous voice in this process. The precept, “nothing about us, without us” is essential to apply. Thankfully I work on a staff with three Indigenous helping teachers who were all willing to meet with me to discuss this work. We began our first meeting by sharing our stories with each other and I am deeply grateful to know each of them better through that which they shared. Stories have a beautiful way of connecting people and building trust. It was from this meeting that we felt the need to create a committee and spend time developing a plan for decolonizing the Indigenous stories and knowledge hosted in our school collections.

The committee includes two Indigenous helping teachers, Allison Hotti of the Dene First Nation and Cheryl Corrick of the Cree First Nation, three Surrey teacher-librarians, Amanda Barnes (Secondary), Dana Shiels and Lesley Johnson (Elementary) as well as myself, the teacher-librarian helping teacher. We secured funding to release the three teacher-librarians for several days to work together in developing a plan to share district wide with our colleagues.

Our committee established two clear goals:

1. Decolonize all Indigenous resources
2. Increase teacher and student access to all Indigenous resources

We further consulted Juanita Coltman, Surrey Schools Principal of Indigenous Peoples Learning on our goals and initial work. She expressed her belief that Indigenous stories and knowledge need to be in a place and organized in a way that elevates their importance and distinguishes them as different (Coltman). We knew we were on the right path and out of this developed our focus question:

How can we honour the land and Indigenous people through the reclassification of Indigenous resources AND increase student and teacher access to Indigenous resources?

I started by researching what has already been done and brought it back to the committee. The first example I found was the Xwi7xwa Library at the University of British Columbia which holds 12,000 items written from First Nations perspectives (Xwi7xwa). It classifies their holdings using a system based on the Brian Deer Classification System. While the system would meet our goal of honouring the land and people, we did not see how such a developed system would support access to 150-200 Indigenous titles, the average we currently see in our Secondary collections. We took note of how people groups, land areas and topics we used for classification as well as the inclusion of resources from the First Nations perspectives.

Another early step on the journey was a conversation with the manager of our Learning Resources department, Ronald Deo. He suggested Gregory Young's book *Elements of Indigenous Style: A Guide for Writing By and About Indigenous People*. What resonated with me from this book was the confirmed necessity to include Indigenous people in this work when he states, "...finding your way through requires thought, care, attention, and dialogue. It requires working with people. It requires the engagement and inclusion needed for a new conversation between Indigenous Peoples and settler society" (Young). We committed to lean on the knowledge of the Indigenous members of our committee as well as consult other Indigenous people as needed along the way.

We also looked at the work of one of our committee members, Lesley Johnson, who had already pulled her Indigenous stories and knowledge resources out of her other collection and organized it by people group. A strength of what she had done was highlight the resources written by and about local nations. Lesley also chose the very first shelves you see when entering her school Library Learning Commons to place her Indigenous resources. We learned what an important message this sends to all who enter and added it to our list of recommendations for other teacher-librarians. However, we all felt, including Lesley, that we need to look deeper at the names used for organization as well as consider where the stories and knowledge that do not fit into a people group belong.

Not finding a structure that we felt we could fully adopt; we began working on developing a classification system of our own. Colleagues, this was both an exciting point on the journey as well as a very daunting one. Together we were up to move forward, stay open, learn, consult and keep our goals in focus.

Initially we based the structure on the land, organized by region, wanting to connect stories to where they were born, shared and reflected. We ran across a few hurdles in doing so. Not all Indigenous people call the land by the same name and they certainly do not refer to the land in the Euro-centric regions we were considering (i.e.

eastern woodlands, subarctic, northwest coast). We were not meeting our first goal so we needed another foundation to our structure. We also were not meeting our second goal of increasing access as the people and stories did not rigidly fit into specific regions. We realized we were imposing a colonial structure again onto the Indigenous people by hoping there would be a map that would outline the specific area of land they adhere to.

Looking back to Lesley's work and the way the Xwi7xwa library used the Brian Deer Classification System, we decided to try a system based on people group and highlight the local nations. We started making progress identifying the following groups of Indigenous people who could be represented in our collection:

Coast Salish

Northwest Coast

First Nations

Metis

Inuit

Global Indigenous

We determined that we would first look at the author of the book and place it in the section of the people group the author identifies. Allison quickly realized we did not have a place for the Indigenous voice of those who are sharing stories of growing up somewhere other than their land. For example, the story of an Indigenous person who was part of the 60s scoop and grew up away from their birth family, land and Indigenous culture. So, we added another section:

Urbanization

Before moving forward, Cheryl reached out to Surrey Schools Senior Indigenous Language and Culture Facilitator, Paula James to consult on the names and section used for our two local nations, the Coast Salish and Northwest Coast. With the go ahead from Paula, we considered the various books that would not fit into these sections. Committee members Amanda Barnes and Dana Shiels began the work of pulling their Indigenous stories and knowledge resources to see how they lived in the structure.

Two things were quickly clear. First, we needed to establish subject topics for resources stories and knowledge that were not written by or about specific Indigenous people. Secondly, we needed to establish criteria for which Indigenous resources would be included in the new collection. We were also working on a title for both the new collection and the classification system.

Each time we landed on a title for the collection we learned that it did not reflect all the Indigenous people groups in our collection. For example, we were excited about

the name The Turtle Island Collection until we consulted Lynn Peplinski and her team at the Inuit Heritage Trust. We came across their work when looking for a map earlier in this process. The Inuit members of Lynn's team shared with us that Turtle Island was not an understanding of the land for Inuit people. After consulting Juanita Coltman and Paula James we were able to establish that the First Nations, Metis and Inuit generally choose the collective name Indigenous people when they are not able to be identified by their own nation. So, the name Indigenous Peoples Collection (IPC) and the Indigenous Peoples Classification System (IPCS) were established to meet our first goal.

Meanwhile I did some research on what to include in the collection. I was thankful to find many sources to support the idea of centering the collection around authentic Indigenous voices. To start, article 31 in the 2007 United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous People states that: "Indigenous peoples have the right to maintain, control, protect and develop their cultural heritage, traditional knowledge and traditional cultural expressions, as well as the manifestation of their sciences, technologies and cultures, including human and genetic resources, seeds, medicines, knowledge of the properties of fauna and flora, oral traditions, literatures, designs, sports and traditional games and visual and performing arts. They also have the right to maintain, control, protect and develop their intellectual property over such cultural heritage, traditional knowledge, and traditional cultural expressions" (United Nations).

Further, my reading established that stories or knowledge about Indigenous people that are shared by non-Indigenous people is an act of imposing colonialism. Not only is authentic authorship a human right to Indigenous people but it also is, "...helping to address colonial legacies, ensuring that First Peoples' cultures and perspectives are portrayed accurately and authentically, and providing opportunities for diverse First Nations, Métis, and Inuit voices in Canada to be recognized and celebrated" (FNESC).

Thankfully the publishing industry has increased the publication of authentic Indigenous voices to support these criteria. The First Nations Education Steering Committee reports that, "The past two decades have seen a dramatic increase in the number of Indigenous texts" (FNESC).

All the sources I found support the two criteria succinctly outlined by the First Nations Education Steering Committee, "Authentic First Peoples texts are historical or contemporary texts that are created by First Peoples or through the substantial contributions of First Peoples" (FNESC). This really helped clarify for Amanda and Dana which resources belonged in their new IPC.

Cheryl and I were then able to visit both Amanda and Dana in their schools to see how the collections and organization was going. Both had piles of books for each section as well as a pile or two of books that did not belong to the identified people groups. We knew we needed to carefully identify subject headings to meet our second goal, increasing access to these resources. Remembering Jessie Bach's discussion of

this process in her post “Decolonizing the Language of Library Cataloguing”, we want to, “ensure accurate and culturally appropriate description of Indigenous individuals, Peoples, and topics...” (Bach).

The committee met again and based on the piles of books that didn’t fit yet, we outlined various subjects that we could use while keeping our goals central to our decisions. It took time, testing, consulting and reflection before landing on the subjects:

Culture

History

Governance

Truth & Reconciliation

And under those headings we added subheadings:

Culture

Own Voice (for biographies, memoirs and anthologies of story)

History

Residential Schools (to increase access to this important piece of history)

Truth & Reconciliation

Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women (to increase awareness for the ongoing need for truth and reconciliation for the missing and murdered Indigenous women)

We also added a section for teachers resources for teacher-librarians who are curating resources specific for teachers to utilize in their work.

We implemented these subjects in Amanda and Dana’s collections and felt confident we had created a classification system that met our goals and would work in our K – 12 setting. At this time, we also identified that after the development of an IPC, a goal of this project is for teacher-librarians to include further curate Indigenous stories and knowledge resources as a result of visually seeing the collection organized using the IPCS.

The next step was to establish how the books would be labelled. With our goal of increasing access in mind, we considered our student audience and the size of the IPC and kept it as simple as possible.

Around this time, I learned that our colleague Heather Daly, Coquitlam School District’s STEAM and Resource innovation Coordinator, had worked with teacher-librarians in her district on a similar project with the same goals. I booked a meeting with her where she shared about their First Nations, Metis and Inuit (FNMI) collections

housing English and French fiction and nonfiction Indigenous resources. Heather also was willing to consult on our current structure. Her feedback was encouraging and helpful as she identified some redundancies in the developing labelling plan.

Meeting back with the committee and sharing Heather's feedback we established that our spine labels would include the name of the collection, IPC as well as the author cutter and a sticker label that would identify the people group or subject.

And then guess what happened colleagues? Summer!

After a year of work, the committee was excited that we were on the cusp of formally developing the first Indigenous Peoples Collections using the Indigenous Peoples Classification System and labeling them all to meet our two goals.

In the early fall, Kathy Puharich, Director of Instruction in Priority Practices approved the funds to commission an Indigenous artist to create art for the sticker labels and pay for the printing. This is currently in the works after we consulted Lyn Daniels, Director of Indigenous Peoples Learning, on hiring one artist to produce all the stickers and was affirmed. We also have funding approval to release teacher-librarians to learn about this journey and to begin developing their Indigenous Peoples Collection. It is such an encouragement to us that 44 of our colleagues have chosen to participate.

This brings me to today, where this journey is still going. I write to you because our committee is open to your thoughts, ideas and feedback, dear colleagues. Our commitment is not to get something right on our own, but to the best extent possible honour Indigenous people by thoughtfully and intentionally centering their voice in our collections as well as amplify their voice through their story and knowledge by increasing access to the collection. It is our hope that through this work we can participate in the act of reconciliation by answering the 63rd call to action by, "building student capacity for intercultural understanding, empathy, and mutual respect" through the power of Indigenous story (Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada).

Thank you for receiving my story. I hope that as you read a feeling has been stirred in you that this journey is in some way choosing you too.

With gratitude and a posture of grace and gentleness towards you,

Andrea LaPointe

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