

# **Our Journey to Decolonize our School Library: Then, Now and Tomorrow**

**By Megan Price and Rebekah Rustad**

*“Decolonisation is less about returning to a precolonial society and more about recognising that we live under a colonial system. That things are the way they are, not by accident, but because a particular ideology has systematically erased others while normalising itself [...] So when we’re able to recognise these structures through what will be a never-ending process of decolonisation, it helps us move forward toward a society that doesn’t just draw inspiration from a diversity of spaces but is also self-aware. Which I think is the most important part” (Aotearoa Liberation League, 2022).*

The movement to decolonize education has been common in conversations in School District 57 for the past few years, so we asked ourselves what would that look like for our students, in our library? Education in Canada is undeniably colonial and the ways that the school system has failed our students, and generations upon generations before them, are too many to count. However, we can look at residential schools and the “Sixties Scoop,” (Johnston, 1983), to see a few examples of the direct impact that colonialism continues to have in our school today. Prince George Secondary School (PGGS) was built in 1968, when the “Sixties Scoop” was still going strong, and it would be nearly half a century before the government acknowledged the horrors perpetuated within residential school systems. This knowledge ties into Aotearoa Liberation League’s statement, (Aotearoa Liberation League, 2022), and helps us understand that we must continue to work to recognize and identify ongoing colonial structures in order to support decolonization. As we continue to discuss these past injustices and recognize the ways in which education in Canada has historically been colonial, we can simultaneously work to make our space here and now more inclusive of Indigenous ways of knowing and being.

Kayla Lar-Son, Indigenous Programs and Services Librarian at UBC, made a statement about her position as Indigenous Academic Resident for University of Alberta Libraries that had a strong impact on our journey towards decolonizing our library learning commons (LLC). Lar-son said that “The way libraries promote themselves; they’re not normally places where Indigenous people see themselves, especially because of the lack of representation” (McCreary, 2018, August 29). We set a goal that Indigenous students, staff, and community members would be able to see themselves represented in our library learning commons. We want them to know that they are safe, they are welcome, and they belong.

We had several conversations about what exactly it would look like to decolonize our learning commons space. We knew that changing our physical space would be largely prohibited by budget and decided that while we could not start over and renovate the library, we could work with intention every day on our collection. Prior to consciously choosing to decolonise our LLC, we thought that our collection

was making great strides in showcasing several diverse authors and characters. With this in mind, we started a diversity audit on our graphic novels, as we thought they would be a fair representation of how we were doing with our collection. Many of the books were newer additions to the library, most within the last ten years or so, versus other sections like non-fiction, which had a much larger collection and had been sourced from numerous librarians over the previous decades.

To begin our audit, we watched Rebeca Rubio’s “Diversity Audit Webinar”, (Rubio, 2021), and the library team compiled a list of things we were looking for in our audit. For example, we selected gender, ethnicity, and Own Voice. Immediately we realized that this audit would be imperfect, there were so many distinct aspects we could choose to examine, but we wanted to undertake something we felt was achievable, so we chose a few categories that we thought would give a fair representation of each book.

Choosing our categories proved to be the first of many hurdles, for as we began the audit, we were faced with increased questions. One question that arose is how do we truly determine a person’s cultural background or gender identity if they are not open and public with that information? Some authors will have a public account with a Pride flag in their bio, which could indicate that they identify as LGBTQ2S+, or they could just be an ally. In terms of neurodiversity, unless an author includes that information in their book or through their online presence, it is virtually impossible to know that information. What about those authors who are newer, or relatively unknown, and little can be found about them? When auditing the characters, how can we get a true sense of them unless we personally read every single book? Even for the authors and stories with significant information available about them, it was still a time-consuming process to work through it all. Despite the never-ending questions that kept popping up, we continued to audit the best we could, admitting that although our system was far from perfect, it was a start.

A	B	C	D	E	F	G	H	I	J	K	L	M	N
Title	Author	Evaluators Initial	Author: He	Author: She	Author: They	Author: SOGI	Author: Indigeno	Author: Indigeno	Author: Caucasian	Author: Asian	Author: Biracial	Author: POC	Author: LatinX

Fig 1. Version 1 of our diversity audit spreadsheet.

Through the auditing process we were looking to see if our graphic novels were diverse, but more specifically, we wanted to see if the genre held contemporary works by Indigenous authors, as well as accurate depictions of Indigenous history. We found a couple overtly racist, outdated materials that were weeded, but we also found some that were politically incorrect in their depictions, yet authentic towards the thinking of the time. We had discussions about what to do with these materials, because we know that acknowledging where we come from is a key step in decolonization, but we also want to ensure we are making space for authentic voices. This delicate balance involves keeping pieces that acknowledge the historical injustices and racism, while also ensuring we have other pieces that empower Indigenous voices. Ultimately, we finished the graphic novel audit and found ourselves disappointed with the results. Most of our materials were authored and/or illustrated by cis-hetero, neuronormative, Caucasian men. It should be noted that there were some stunning exceptions to the overall trend, however, our audit

showed us that we have a long way to go. Although we were disappointed to discover our graphic novels were not as responsive and current as we initially thought, our early steps towards decolonization were not solely limited to the audit.

In addition to the audit, we intentionally sourced authentic rugs, maps, and posters to ensure that our budget would go to Indigenous-owned businesses. One example includes the Seven Sacred Teachings rug from Native Reflections, an Indigenous education supply store located in Winnipeg. It is colourful and the circle is important in Indigenous ways of knowing and being and the teachings are also authentic.

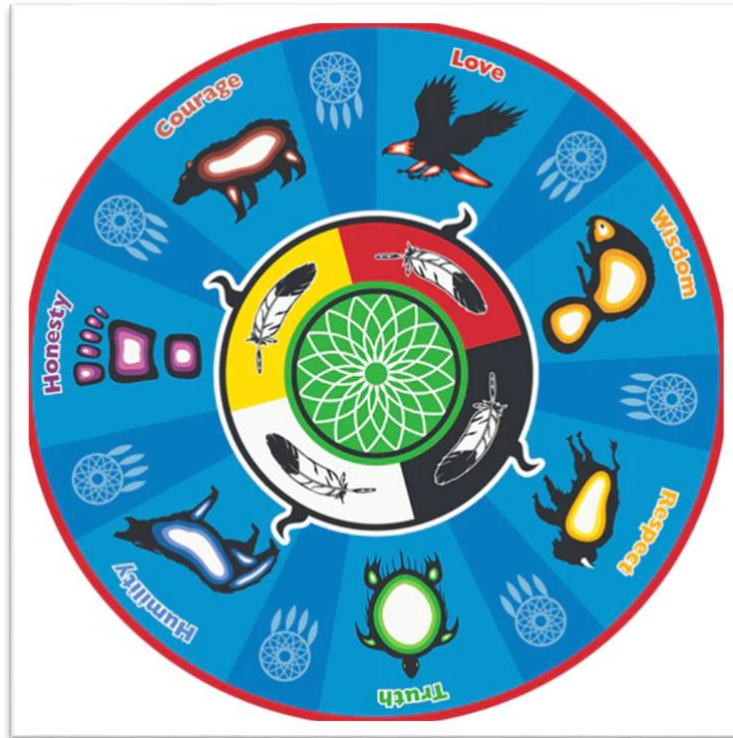


Fig 2. Rug from Native Reflections (Native Reflections, 2022)

Another example can be seen in the map purchased from a business owned by a Native American man. This map is quite exciting for students to look at and to locate their nation in its traditional name. We made sure to hang the map low enough that students can stand in front of it and read any small print. It is also worth noting that there are more nations and dialects located in British Columbia compared to the rest of the map.

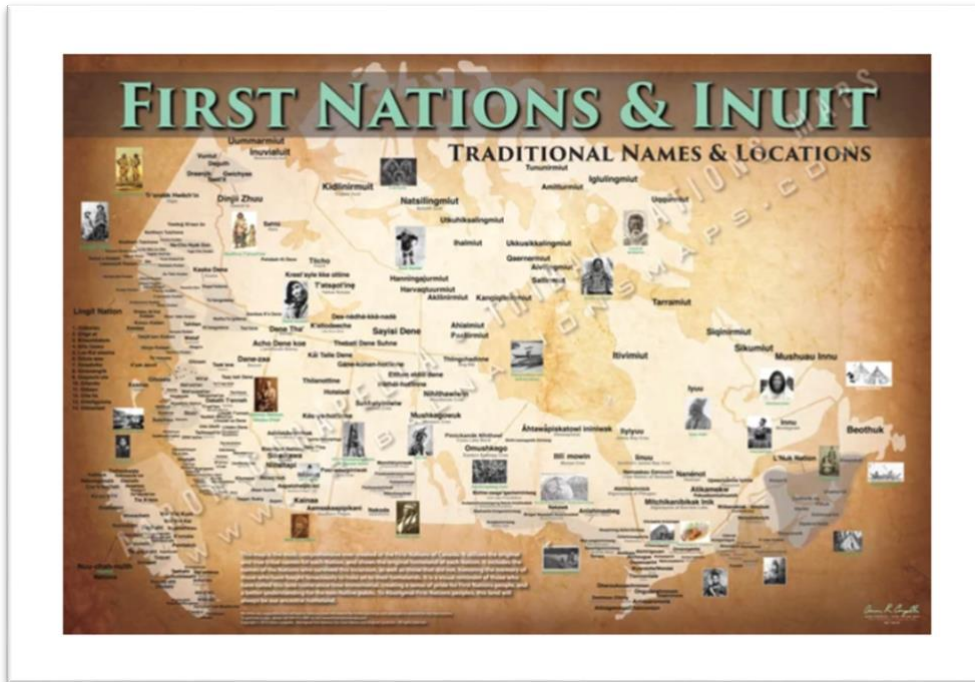


Fig 3. First Nations and Inuit traditional names and locations map (Indigenous Peoples Media LLC, 2020)

Finally, we have our loveseat that was designed by Indigenous Two Spirit artist Scott Wabano and was generously donated to us by IKEA Canada. It is an authentic piece that we very fortunately received for free (with a lot of diligent follow up!) as we often simply do not have the funds to purchase authentic Indigenous furniture.

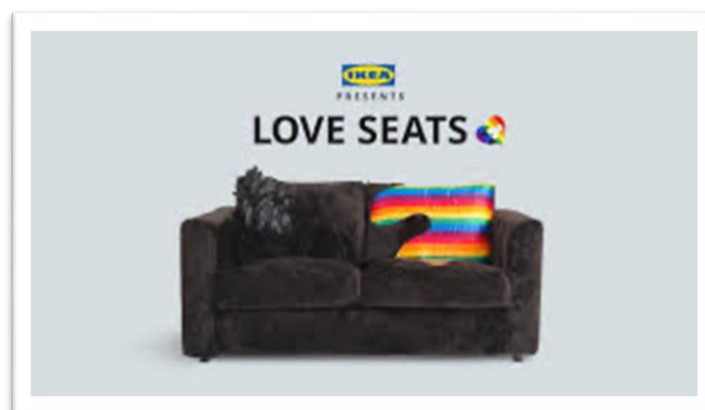


Fig 4. Loveseat designed by Scott Wabano (IKEA Canada, 2021)

Ultimately, the graphic novel audit and the few changes we made to our physical space helped guide us with all the ways we are trying to continue the work of decolonization.

With the start of the 2022-2023 school year, we have an ever-growing list of ways we would like to intentionally transform our space and our collection to make it safe and inviting to our Indigenous staff and students. Pride flags have been purchased to hang in the learning commons, including a Two-Spirit flag, as many Indigenous nations do not recognize the colonial ideal of binary gender. In addition to the flags, we are also working on ensuring our indigenous students feel seen outside of the library via our bulletin boards in the hallways and initiatives outside the LLC.

PGSS is located on the unceded, ancestral lands of the Lheidli T'enneh and is the largest high school in northern BC. Our Indigenous students number in the five hundreds and make up about 1/3 of the student population. We have 9 Lheidli students who live on reserve, and many more who live in the city. A large portion of our Indigenous students are Metis.

This year for back to school, our welcome bulletin board has an Indigenous style polar bear (we are the PGSS Polars) which was designed in school colours by local Lheidli artist, Clayton Gauthier who was mentored by Wet'suwet'en elder, Peter George. Last year, a student from India made us a paper version of the bear that we had laminated so we could use it repeatedly in displays and when it is not on the bulletin board, it has a place in the stairwell in the LLC. A student from Korea and a student from Syria made the speech-bubbles which say "hello" in as many languages as they could think of.



*Fig 5. Display with our school logo and the languages of our students including our local Dakelh.*

We also had our Orange Shirt Display up for the whole month of September, along with intentional book displays within the library each month that highlight diverse authors and stories.



Fig 6. Our rotating display showcases different social justice issues. For September 2022 it is Orange Shirt Day

Moving forward, we also plan to name our two sets of stairs in Lheidli, a dialect of the Dakelh dene language spoken by the Lheidli T'enneh. The main stairs that get more traffic will be named Lhtakoh - river with many tributaries - which is the Dakelh name for what we call the Fraser River. The stairs that are not as busy will be named Nechako - river near big river.

While we continue to work on our physical space, we also want to continue to audit our collection. The first thing we wanted to improve was the actual spreadsheet, which has now been expanded on and refined to allow for more comprehensive auditing, while drop down menus and built-in visual graphs save time and provide instant feedback. Our goal is to use it as a database tool for our collection, so that when a student wants a book by a Black author, or a neurodiverse author, or an authentic Indigenous or trans protagonist, we will be able to find it in our updated tracking sheet. In the future when we are looking for books in our collection about missing and murdered Indigenous women and girls for Red Dress Day, our spreadsheet will help us find them much more easily than our current system does.

	A	B	C	D	E	F	G	H	I	J	K	L	M	N	O	P
	Date Acquired	Title	Author Name	Evaluator's Initials	Fiction or Non-Fiction	Primary Genre	Sub-Genre	Author - Gender	Author - LGBTQ2S+	Author - Ethnicity	Author - Immigration Status	Author - Physical Ability	Author - Neurodivergence	Protagonist - Gender	Protagonist - LGBTQ2S+	
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Fig 7. Version 2 of our diversity audit spreadsheet

As our audit spreadsheet continues to evolve and collect data, it will be a resource for finding and selecting diverse books for our students and colleagues. The system is still not perfect, but it has helped prompt important discussions on how

we need more diverse and authentic materials, alongside stories that show the innovations, accomplishments, and the positive experiences of Indigenous people, because they are more than their pain and trauma. As we continue to search for these books, we are also faced with the uncomfortable truth that publishers decide who gets to tell stories. Although we can hope that the publishing industry is moving forward with the rest of Canada and working towards decolonization as well, the fact is that there just are not as many of these stories being published by Indigenous authors.

The work of decolonizing will never be done in public education in Canada. Our roots and history will always be anchored in racism and eurocentrism. We must continue to challenge ourselves to learn new ways of thinking and unlearn old ways. Indigeneity brings a richness and depth to our mindsets, our space and our collection that has been historically lacking. Our diverse students need to see themselves reflected in our LLC, they need to be able to read stories that highlight them and people who look like them. If we return to the idea that colonialism has normalized itself by erasing Indigenous ways of knowing and being, we need to flip that script, and normalize Indigenous ways while making colonial thinking abnormal.

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