Canadian School Libraries Presents the CSL Collection Diversity Toolkit

By Anita Brooks Kirkland

Snapshot

Our wonderful Canadian Colleague, Anita Brooks Kirkland, introduces and describes the Canadian School Libraries Collection Diversity Toolkit, posing questions of relevance to school libraries everywhere and offering us the tools to develop meaningful, equitable solutions.

Upheaval and change. This is how I would characterize the energy, negative and positive, of the past two years. Social, political, and cultural issues that have been simmering for years have come to a boil under the extreme pressures of pandemic life.

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Increasingly Canadians are acknowledging the hard truths that bely our own self-image as a tolerant multicultural society. We now have to acknowledge that the story of our country has been told through a privileged, colonial lens, and we really don't know ourselves as well as we thought we did.

Canadians are realizing that if we are to live up to the ideals of our country, enshrined in our Charter of Rights and Freedoms, we need to not only be receptive to the truths now being revealed, but we must actively work to make and to sustain positive change for an equitable and inclusive society. There is a strong will in Canada to improve things, particularly in education.

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School library professionals have the capacity to lead positive change. In Canada and across the world there is a clear focus on equity and inclusion, cultural competence and anti-racism, and supporting diversity in all aspects of school library practice, starting with our collections. The collection is the foundation of learning in the library.

The freedom to explore ideas and pursue interests, and expert instruction to develop deep skills for inquiry and information literacy rely on the foundation of that collection. Collection development is more than selecting and acquiring resources, it is about having clear intent to ensure that the collection serves the diverse needs of all of our students. It is about weeding out what is no longer helpful or true. It is about understanding our role, as library professionals, in ensuring that students' right to read and to explore ideas freely are honoured, nurtured, and defended.

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In this time of upheaval and change, there has been huge interest in diversifying collections, and many school districts have already been initiating change. The Prince George, British Columbia school district, for example, had been working on decolonizing practice for some time. The more they did, the more questions arose, and they looked outward to the rest of the country. Their district teacher-librarian Joseph Jeffery posed the question to Canadian School Libraries. What were others around Canada doing about decolonization, and Indigenizing and diversifying collections? Did CSL have resources to help? Joseph recalls the response. '*No, but there should be. Let's put a team together*.' And so began the project to create the **CSL Collection Diversity Toolkit**.

'Sometimes a pebble starts an avalanche, and sometimes a simple question begins a journey.'
Joseph Jeffery, Prince George BC District Teacher-Librarian

The toolkit has been enthusiastically received by school library and education professionals from across the country. We are pleased to share this resource internationally, as its theme is universal to all school libraries. The toolkit may be immediately useful, and may also serve as an exemplar for developing similar resources specific to other contexts.

A Closer Look at the Toolkit

Who is represented in our collections? Can students see themselves reflected in what they read? Are the cultural practices of Canada's Indigenous peoples represented as historical anachronisms, or as part of lived, contemporary culture? Why is weeding an important part of developing and maintaining diverse collections? How do selection and reconsideration procedures provide library professionals with confidence to develop diverse collections? What does an equity-informed library collection look like?

The **CSL Collection Diversity Toolkit** tackles these tough questions, addresses specific challenges, and provides a framework for building collections through an equity lens.

Challenge: Who is represented in our collections? Can students see themselves reflected in what they read? Toronto Star book editor Deborah Dundas conducts annual surveys into Canadian children's publishing. The 2020 survey indicated that 37.5 percent of books featured main characters who were white, a decrease of 8.2 percent over 2018, and 29.3 percent having main characters who were Black, Indigenous, East Asian or South Asian, an increase of 4.9 percent over the previous year. Canadian publishers are being held accountable, and we are seeing ever-increasing selection of diverse titles by diverse authors and illustrators for children and young adults.

Equity-Informed Selection
CSL Collection Diversity Toolkit
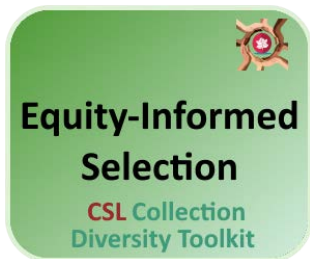
The **Equity-Informed Selection** page of the toolkit provides guidance for selecting a wide range of diverse resources based on sound criteria, including representation of the diversity of Canadian society. This section provides criteria for assessing resources through an equity lens, and connects equity-informed selection to the ethics and values of librarianship.

Challenge: How can we use information to improve practice? It is critical that library collections remain current and responsive to the evolving needs of the learning community. What does the library collection look like in terms of representation?

Diversity Audits
CSL Collection Diversity Toolkit

Diversity audits provide detailed insight into the collection. They help you to assess representation according to a variety of criteria, and to evaluate and use the results to increase diversity. They provide the evidence required to advocate for more inclusive choices. The **Diversity Audits** page of the toolkit outlines benefits and provides guidance for conducting diversity audits.

Challenge: How do we address inequities of the past? Knowledge evolves over time, attitudes shift, societal values expand and evolve, and we begin to see historical and social events from different perspectives. A resource that was selected a decade or more ago may have reflected understandings of the time, but assessed through the lens of current knowledge and understandings, may now fall short. Are students finding current, accurate information, or is the library collection reinforcing biases of the past? What criteria do we use to weed fiction through an equity lens without engaging in censorship?

Equity-Informed Weeding
CSL Collection Diversity Toolkit

The **Equity-Informed Weeding** page of the toolkit goes beyond the basics. It makes the case for weeding being a key equity issue, explores specific issues, and provides guidelines for examining the collection through an equity lens. The toolkit outlines detailed critical 'look-fors' for weeding every section of the collection.

Challenge: How do we ensure that collection development is based on sound, unbiased criteria which defend universal principles of intellectual freedom? How do we place collection diversity within the context of the rights and freedoms of all Canadians? What is our defence against censorship, particularly relevant now as we witness populist backlash and the epidemic of book challenges and censorship in the United States (Beaudry, 2021).

The **Guidelines and Procedures** page of the toolkit places policy about collection development firmly within the context of intellectual freedom and the right to read. A good selection guideline provides the foundation for developing a diverse collection, based on sound principles. In school libraries, those guidelines should consider the role of resources in learning, and also provide guidance about representation and diversity. Sound reconsideration procedures provide a defence against censorship through a process that assesses the resource in terms of compliance with selection criteria rather than the values of the challenger.

The CSL Collection Diversity Toolkit includes two sections that, while not being of particular relevance to Australians, may provide inspiration for similar approaches. These include:

Leading Learning Connections: This section puts the toolkit within the framework of *Leading Learning: Standards of Practice for School Library Learning Commons in Canada*, and makes connections to how developing diverse collections exemplifies the best in school library learning commons practice.

Recommended Book Lists and Review Sites: This section provides a curated list of sources for book lists focusing on diversity from reliable, expert sources, and links to specific Canadian vendors whose focus is on diversity.

When we released the toolkit in October 2021, we were overwhelmed by the positive response. It seems that library professionals in Canada and beyond were hungry for guidance for developing diverse collections. That the toolkit goes beyond selection to consider the health and vibrancy of the entire collection over time was what excited people the most. We are very happy to share the CSL Collection Diversity Toolkit internationally, and invite you to use and adapt our material to suit your own context.

Please take a look!

Connect to the Canadian School Libraries
Collection Diversity Toolkit

References

Beaudry, Richard (2021). When politics trumps teachers' professional judgment, students and society lose. *Canadian School Libraries Journal 5*(3). Accessed at **https://journal.canadianschoollibraries.ca/when-politics-trumps-teachers-professional-judgment-students-and-society-lose/**

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*As a writer, presenter and consultant, **Anita Brooks Kirkland** specializes in the areas of information and digital literacy and the role of the school library learning commons. She draws on her extensive experience as a teacher educator, both as an instructor in teacher-librarianship for the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education (OISE), University of Toronto, and in her previous role as the Consultant for K-12 Libraries at the Waterloo Region District School Board. Anita was a contributing writer to Together for Learning, Ontario's guideline document for the school library learning commons. Anita is very active in professional organizations, currently serving as chair of Canadian School Libraries. She was the 2014 president of the Ontario Library Association and has also served as president of the Ontario School Library Association (2005) and co-chaired The Association of Library Consultants and Coordinators of Ontario (2011-13). Anita shares an extensive collection of program resources, articles, and presentations on her website and blog, www.bythebrooks.ca*