

Barriers and Collaborations in Decolonization and Indigenization of Library and Information Studies (LIS) Programs in Canada

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ABSTRACT

Decolonization and Indigenization of Library and Information Studies (LIS) curriculum is a crucial undertaking in the Canadian context, especially in light of the work of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC), the adoption of UNDRIP, and national discussions around reconciliation. While there have been varied initiatives at Canadian LIS schools, structural barriers including accreditation requirements and institutional siloing among others inhibit the development of pan-Canadian collaborations. After a review of the literature, this paper explores the multiple barriers to decolonization and Indigenization of LIS curriculum in a Canadian context and then examines the work National Indigenous Knowledge and Language Alliance (NIKLA), and Indigenous led partnerships, in advancing work in this area. The paper concludes by discussing future work planned by NIKLA and its Indigenous Curriculum working group, while also noting future challenges.

ALISE RESEARCH TAXONOMY TOPICS

Accreditation; Curriculum; Education programs/schools.

AUTHOR KEYWORDS

Decolonization; Indigenization; Canada; LIS education.

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BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

Education has a special role in Canadian work towards decolonization and Indigenization. Justice Murray Sinclair, chair of Canada's Truth and Reconciliation Committee (TRC) noted, "Education got us into this mess and education will get us out of it." (Chalmers-Brooks, 2023). While education has been noted as a critical pathway for reformulating relationships between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples in Canada, Library and Information Science (LIS) curricula have not adequately and appropriately integrated Indigenous topics, courses, and learning outcomes into programs in Canada.

Canada's colonial legacy has included numerous injustices which stem from the appropriation and continued occupation of First Nation, Métis, and Inuit (Indigenous) lands and the historical and ongoing impacts of the *Indian Act* which have cumulated in numerous well-documented negative impacts. However, it is the Residential and Day School systems, which was in place for more than 100 years, that turned the education into an apparatus for genocide (House of Commons, 2022). Established in 2008 as part of the Government of Canada's Statement of Apology regarding Residential Schools, the TRC travelled the country hearing from survivors and documenting their stories. The Truth and Reconciliation Commission's (2015) *Calls to Action* directly specify numerous ways in which education must be addressed at the primary, secondary and post-secondary level to provide redress and ensure current and future good relations.

The Truth and Reconciliation Commission's *Calls to Action* include four specific recommendations directed at museums and archives (TRC, 2015b). Although not specifically named, LIS education is implicated in this work. LIS education is historically constructed around Euro-centric approaches to knowledge and information, which has not only historically ignored, but undermined Indigenous knowledges and ways of knowing. Decolonization and

Indigenization of LIS curricula is crucial so that students, many of whom become professional practitioners in the cultural memory sector, can facilitate reconciliation in their own work. Indigenization of these curricula is also central to increasing the number of Indigenous students, and thus future practitioners, in libraries.

The importance of enhancing educational opportunities for Indigenous professionals in these fields and decolonizing LIS is underscored by the Canadian Federation of Library Associations (CFLA) Truth and Reconciliation Report and Recommendations, which was released in response to the national TRC report and *Calls to Action*. Specifically, the CFLA report recommendation seven states:

Enhance opportunities for Indigenous library, archival and information professionals as well as the inclusion of Indigenous epistemologies in the Canadian library and archives profession through culturally appropriate pedagogy, recruitment practices, professional and continuing education and cross-cultural training in collaboration with local Indigenous stakeholders and partners; (CFLA, n.d. p. 6)

However, progress on advancing the CFLA's recommendation and decolonization in general has been inhibited.

This paper explores the current literature on decolonization in LIS in Canada and the complexities involved in such work before examining the collaborative work undertaken by the National Indigenous Knowledge and Language Alliance (NIKLA) and specifically its Teaching and Learning community. Finally, the paper concludes by discussing the work remaining to be done and further challenges to be overcome.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Literature on decolonization and Indigenization in LIS education in the Canadian context is small and nascent. Existing scholarship is largely focused on reporting on single institutions and courses (Ball & Lar-Son, 2021; Samek, 2021.) Historically, LIS education in Canada has failed to produce curricula that is culturally appropriate for Indigenous students (Doerksen & Martin, 2015). Specialized curriculum is rare, with the notable exception of the University of British Columbia's First Nations Curriculum Concentration, and limited student librarian/internship programs exist to encourage Indigenous recruitment (Ramos, 2020). A review of Association for Library and Information Science Education (ALISE) curriculum data from Canadian schools found that while there were a range of new courses introduced up through 2020, no specific mention of courses related to decolonization and Indigenization was present, (Chung, Schalk & Yoon, 2022). However, competency related to decolonization, Indigenization and reconciliation has emerged as a high value skill for LIS graduates (Hill & Mills, 2023). The Canadian Association of Research Libraries (CARL) does include knowledge of decolonization, working with Indigenous communities and knowledge of the TRC's Calls to Action as an element of its *Competencies for Librarians in Canadian Research Libraries* (CARL, 2020). While there are several case studies of work undertaken, there is a distinct lack of empirical research examining progress toward decolonization and Indigenization in Canadian LIS programs.

Beyond the narrow discussions about decolonization and Indigenous of LIS education, literature is more extensive on the Canadian post-secondary context in general. Of specific note is Gaudry and Lorenz's (2018) categorization of not a single form of Indigenization, but three related approaches - Indigenous inclusion, reconciliation Indigenization and decolonial Indigenization - the latter of which would require radical transformation. Debassige et al., (2022) identify several barriers and approaches to Indigenization, while underscoring one key challenge is the nebulous invocations of the concept of Indigenizing.

DECOLONIZATION AND INDIGENIZATION COMPLEXITIES IN CANADIAN LIS EDUCATION

Decolonization and Indigenization of Canadian LIS curriculum faces a variety of challenges. The work of the TRC including its report, the summary version of which alone totaled over 500 pages (TRC, 2015a) and the *Calls to Action* (TRC, 2015b) were instrumental in underscoring the need for Canadian society to address the legacy of residential schools and work toward reconciliation. The *Calls to Action* implicated work in LIS in numerous ways: Calls six to 12 dealt with education; 13 to 17 covered language; 62 to 65 addressed the importance of education for reconciliation; and Calls 67-70 specifically focused on museums and archives. However, specific mention of libraries and library work were limited to just a single mention in Call 69 related to work to be undertaken by Library and Archives Canada, Canada's national library (TRC, 2015b, p. 8). The omission of explicit calls relating to librarians facilitates an argument that addressing the TRC's *Calls to Action* is not specifically the work of libraries. Gaps in undertaking work related to the TRC are evident. In a study of strategic plans of 10 Canadian public libraries from 2021, three were found lacking explicit commitments to Indigenous communities (Rathi, 2021), and in a subsequent study of 12 academic libraries in Canada, not all were found to have direct references to the Calls to Action (Rathi & Branch-Mueller, 2024). Some, but not all, Canadian library associations sampled referred to the TRC's *Calls to Action* (Weibe & Rathi, 2020).

Another significant barrier to decolonization work in Canadian LIS schools is the lack of specific accreditation requirements in this regard (Hill & Mills, 2023). The TRC released its report and *Calls to Action* in 2015 and the CFLA report followed in 2017; however, at this time Canadian LIS schools were working under the 2015 ALA *Standards for Accreditation*. The 2015 Standards were silent on issues of decolonization, reconciliation and Indigenization as well as on broader related concepts of equity, diversity, inclusion (EDI), and social justice. Moreover, the Standards lack any specific consideration of uniquely Canadian contexts in LIS education. The mid 2010s marked a unique point in Canadian librarianship as the Canadian Library Association dissolved in 2015 (Peet, 2016). While dissolution of the CLA led to a partial vacuum in a national LIS voice.

With both the emergence of the CFLA in 2016 and the 2023 revisions to the *Standards for Accreditation* (ALA, 2023), these challenges have been partially remedied. The 2023 Standards centre the values of EDI and social inclusion. Drawing on definitions from the ALA's Office for Diversity, Literacy and Outreach Services, social justice specifically focuses on power

dynamics including the acknowledgment of historical and institutional inequities (ALA, n.d.). Although the centering of EDI and social justice in the Standards supports Canadian LIS schools in their work toward decolonization and Indigenization, these two specific concepts critically remain absent.

The creation of the CFLA along with the publishing of its own Truth and Reconciliation Report in 2017 resulted in some limited progress around advancing decolonization and Indigenization in Canadian LIS schools. In addition to Recommendation 7 (quoted above), the CFLA report made several further comments on LIS programs in Canada including a suggestion these programs work toward increasing recruitment and retention of Indigenous students and change pedagogies to ensure a balance of Indigenous and Western ways of knowing (CFLA, n.d., p. 41). The Report also led to the formation of the CFLA Standing Committee on Indigenous Matters. In turn the Standing Committee on Indigenous Matters established an Indigenous Curriculum work working group chaired by [removed for blinding]. The working group resulted in an (unsuccessful) grant application (Callison, Hernandez-Read & George, n.d.) and a gathering of educators in LIS and archival programs in Edmonton, Alberta in November of 2019. Work on LIS education under the CFLA was ultimately limited by two factors. The onset of COVID-19 in early 2020 significantly impacted the momentum established in the gathering from late 2019. The plan had been for the Canadian deans and directors of LIS programs to take on further discussions around decolonization work; however, follow through on this plan was lost because of shifting priorities in response to COVID. Controversy within the CFLA in relation to intellectual freedom (see Carr-Wiggin et al, 2024; McNally & De Agostini, 2024), resulted in a significant loss of membership to its Standing Committee on Indigenous Matters. CFLA led work toward decolonization and Indigenization in Canadian LIS schools has been limited.

A final barrier to decolonization work has been the siloing of the Canadian LIS schools combined with each individual faculty members' academic freedom. Although there have been various initiatives, such as the development of the Indigenous Library and Information Studies in a Canadian Context course at the University of Alberta (Ball & Lar-Son, 2021), little exists to coordinate efforts across institutions. There exists no uniquely Canadian LIS education body, and no equivalent to ALISE. The Canadian Association for Information Science has seven of eight LIS schools as institutional members (CAIS, 2023) but is not pedagogically focused.

Within institutions, individual instructors cannot be compelled to include material related to decolonization and reconciliation in courses because of academic freedom. Although institutions and programs are publicly committing to reconciliation efforts in Canada, instructors make the ultimate decisions on course content. While not specific to LIS education, concerns that work related to TRC initiatives are perceived to threaten academic freedom have been noted (Bispig, 2024; Venton, 2015). An article in the newsletter Society for Academic Freedom and Scholarship, based in Regina, Canada, goes even further stating explicitly that "Decolonization poses a clear threat to academic freedom, open inquiry and the main mission of the university" (MacRae, 2023).

From the TRC Calls to Action not explicitly naming libraries in reconciliation work, the lack of specific ALA accreditation standards, limited intra-institutional collaboration and academic freedom, numerous structural and organizational challenges exist to advancing decolonization and Indigenization in Canadian LIS education.

COLLABORATION WITH THE NATIONAL INDIGENOUS KNOWLEDGE AND LANGUAGE ALLIANCE

Although several factors have impeded collective, cross-campus work toward decolonization and Indigenization, a new collaboration, led through the National Indigenous Knowledge and Language Alliance (NIKLA) aims to try to overcome these challenges. NIKLA was created in response to the need for a national Indigenous association focused on Indigenous knowledge and cultural heritage (Callison et al., n.d.). NIKLA was established through a series of conversations from 2012 to 2018 culminating in a meeting to establish NIKLA (for a detailed history of NIKLA see Callison et al., n.d.). Working with autonomous Indigenous organization is specifically noted as an effective approach for decolonization (Debassige et al., 2022) Although organizations such as the CFLA include Indigenous representation on their board, national organizations in the Canadian cultural memory sector are not Indigenous organizations.

NIKLA is comprised of five communities (Archives, Culture & Heritage, Library, Museum, and Teaching & Learning) as well as a Local Organization Community, an Institutional Committee, and a Standing Committee on Indigenous Knowledge (NIKLA, n.d.). The Teaching and Learning Committee, chaired by [removed for blinding], was tasked with work toward decolonization and Indigenization in Canadian LIS programs. As part of the Teaching & Learning Committee's goals, the Indigenous Curriculum Working Group was formalized in December 2023 (NIKLA, 2023). Initially, the group was composed of four members including a university librarian, LIS faculty member, and LIS doctoral student, all of Indigenous ancestry, and one tenured academic faculty member from a Canadian LIS school.

The Indigenous Curriculum Working Group has taken several initial steps to date. The limited size of the group, and lack of fiscal resources, had made application for grants a primary activity, and the group has received two small grants in this regard. Work is currently underway to survey deans and directors of Canadian LIS programs to determine programmatic initiatives related to decolonization and Indigenization. This work is complemented by examinations of program websites. Following the work, to be completed in spring 2025, the next phase will involve building relationships and networks across Canadian LIS programs. The aims of this initial work are to provide a foundation for future research.

Members of the group also participated at the CARL "Exploring Indigenous Knowledges and Open Educational Resources (OER)" summit held at the University of British Columbia in February 2024 (CARL, n.d.). At the summit, it was determined that NIKLA would take the lead on advancing advocacy and understanding related to Indigenous knowledge and OER with that

work shared between NIKLA's Standing Committee on Indigenous Knowledge and the Indigenous Curriculum Working Group. Ultimately, the Working Group would like to develop Indigenous created and owned learning resources that could be used in Canadian LIS programs.

FUTURE WORK AND CHALLENGES

Creating new learning objects for using in Canadian LIS programs requires resources currently well beyond the Working Group's means. The Working Group is constrained by a lack of active members reflecting, in part, the overall lack of Indigenous faculty in LIS programs in Canada and the heavy workloads placed on Indigenous LIS community members. Concomitantly, the necessary financial resources to develop high quality learning resources is missing, and in the Canadian context the primary funding body for social sciences research, the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council does not fund curricular development because its mandate is research oriented (SSHRC, 2020).

Shifting academic priorities present additional challenges as institutions have begun pulling back from EDI work. For example, at the beginning of 2025, the University of Alberta announced it was shifting towards "access, community + belong" instead of EDI (University of Alberta, 2025). Several other post-secondary institutions in Alberta, none of which have LIS schools, have followed this approach (Liddle, 2025). Retreats from EDI in Alberta reflect the more substantive attacks on EDI in the United States.

Despite these challenges, the work of NIKLA offers a promising step forward. NIKLA's Indigenous Curriculum Working Group and its larger Teaching & Learning Committee fill an important gap in the Canadian LIS landscape and represents the only Indigenous led multi-institution initiative.

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