My name is Laurette Lapalme, I work at the Hazelton District Public Library with Ruth Cooper. I was handed a great big word to be in charge of and I wasn’t quite sure what to say about it. This panel is here to speak about Community Summer Reading Clubs: Serving First Nations Children and during the discussions, I was asked to address the word ‘relevancy’, and I had to really think about that. I am part of the Witsuwit’en Nation in Northwest British Columbia, a Nation which lies between New Hazelton all the way to Burns Lake, covering an area about 22,000 kilometres squared. The word relevancy brings a lot of things to mind. First Nations peoples across the continent face many challenges and are surrounded by many barriers, yet the essence of Summer Reading Club is about building bridges and about the love of learning.

Relationship building is a gentle gateway that opens paths toward ensuring that your Summer Reading Program is a success, and I feel that Libraries as a social entity have the best chance of building the strongest bridges. Many First Nations communities have organisations that are already working on Literacy related programming and may have personnel that would be able to provide insider information about how to successfully launch a Summer Reading program in a particular location. Discovering who to contact is part of the journey toward success and seeking this information can provide many positive paths to follow.

The Hazelton region has the densest population of First Nations people in Canada. Two major nations, the Gitxsan and the Witsuwit’en are divided by the Bulkley River, a natural boundary that leads to one of the most important things to note when planning a summer reading program for your First Nations community – each one is very different from the other. Each Nation is a separate entity on its own, what works for one community might fail in another, even inside a single nation, each village has its unique character, and one of the guidelines to developing a successful Summer Reading Program would be the appropriate location
and assistance of a culturally conversant person to lead those clubs, or at the very least, to provide input during the development of the program.

One of the most important considerations to understand is the unique qualities of each Nation. View British Columbia, or anywhere with First Nations people, as you would Europe. What might work in France may not succeed in Germany, and you wouldn’t expect it to because they are very different countries with their own unique customs, languages, and history. Geographic proximity does not necessarily mean that neighboring nations are similar, in fact, they could be as different from their close neighbor as countries can be when existing on different continents. This is a challenge for Libraries to embrace and overcome.

There are several elements that can be employed to highlight the connections between First Nations communities and libraries, and the most noticeable is content. At the Hazelton Library, we carry many different publications that shine a light on many different facets of First Nations culture, please remember that all collections are an evolution. When small children see these books, it forges a connection between that child and their culture, as well as to the library itself. Due to how history has played out, First Nations people have varying degrees of understanding regarding their own cultural background. Some have only the most basic understanding of where they come from while others bear vast detail and comprehensive skills. Storytelling is one of the common methods of transmitting knowledge from one generation to the next and provides the easiest access point into a young person’s sphere of interest. Children from everywhere love stories, love to hear them being told, or how to read them on their own. Having a Summer Reading Club situated within the community they are already familiar with makes this connexion even easier to foster and maintain.
There is much more to say about relevancy when it comes to Summer Reading Clubs and First Nations communities, but so little time to try and fit in all the many topics and considerations that should be made when launching a new program. Ask yourselves questions like: Where are you hosting it? The library? The community? Which facility and why? Who are your Club Leaders? Are the children going to be comfortable spending time with those people? How are you going to ensure that you are culturally sensitive, and that you aren’t unintentionally being insulting, condescending, or making an invisible problem worse? There’s a fine line between cultural sensitivity and cultural misappropriation.

Summer Reading Clubs sometimes encounter problems far outside the scope of the program itself, and yet, libraries must be mindful that they are approaching communities filled with people who are immersed in several generations of social divides, anxieties, and conflicts that have nothing to do with learning a new simple craft or spending an hour reading fun books with large colourful pictures. Making progress means understanding that these complications exist, and while it isn’t possible for a single library to overturn the negative impact of colonialization and the long-term harm it caused, Libraries working together can help create a new road for all parties to travel on together as a community committed to progress, learning, and cooperation.

As I have mentioned, there is much more to say and many areas that need further discussion, so I invite those who are interested to contact me at HDPL via my email address (see slide) to continue this discussion. I am happy to help wherever I am able.