

Updating subject headings for children's literature at the University of Strathclyde

the Children's Theme Index

Andrew McAinsh

University of Strathclyde

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ABSTRACT

The Cataloguing and Metadata team at the University of Strathclyde recently undertook a comprehensive review of subject headings used for the Library's collection of children's literature. The purpose of this review was to bring this set of in-house subject headings up to date, make it more representative and inclusive, and better integrate it with cataloguing workflows. This article introduces the collection and its subject headings, discusses why a review was needed, and outlines how the review was carried out, and how changes were implemented in the LMS and discovery service.

KEYWORDS EDI; subject headings; children's literature; authority control

CONTACT Andrew McAinsh  andrew.mcainsh@strath.ac.uk  University of Strathclyde

Introduction: The Children's Books Collection

The University of Strathclyde has a long tradition of teacher training, which continues today through the teaching and research activities of the Strathclyde Institute of Education. The university library plays an essential role in supporting these activities, and one of the ways this is done is through the provision of a collection of children's literature. The Children's Books collection originated in the Jordanhill College of Education, which was founded in the early 20th century in the west end of Glasgow. In 1993 Jordanhill College merged with the University of Strathclyde to become the university's Faculty of Education. The Jordanhill campus (and its library) was eventually closed in 2012, and the library's staff and collections relocated to the Andersonian Library in the city centre.

While most books from the Jordanhill library were simply merged into the main lending collection in their new home, the Children's Books collection was kept intact and shelved separately. Most of the local cataloguing and classification practices for children's literature that originated at Jordanhill are still followed today. The non-fiction material in the collection follows standard Dewey Decimal Classification, but for literature there is a local scheme, a simplified version of which is shown here:

J 808	Children's literature
J 808.1	Poetry
J 808.2	Drama
J 808.3	Fiction
J 808.33	Picture books
J 808.34	Giant picture books
J 808.35	Dual language books
J 808.36	Gaelic books

This is not a traditional children's collection. It is not directly accessed or used by children but rather by the students and staff of the Strathclyde Institute of Education, who select books either for research or for use in the classroom while on placement. It can be a difficult collection to 'shelf-browse' as all the books (including picture books with narrow spines) are shelved spine-out; there are none of the mobile book browsers typically found in the children's section of a public library. This means that catalogue records – especially the subject headings – are crucial in helping users to navigate the collection.



Figure 1: Part of the Children's Books collection in the Andersonian Library

The Children's Theme Index

Another significant difference between the Children's Books collection and the rest of the collections in the Andersonian Library is in the use of subject headings. While almost all our other collections use Library of Congress Subject Headings (LCSH), this collection uses a locally-managed resource called the Children's Theme Index (CTI). This is another piece of cataloguing practice that was carried over from the Jordanhill library.

Users have diverse reasons for using each book in the collection. For instance, *Elmer*¹ (McKee, 1989) is, at surface level, a book about animals and colours, but it can also function as a book about self-esteem or the value of diversity. This means that when cataloguing a children's book, we aim to add a range of subject headings, covering the immediately apparent topics of the book as well as broader, more nebulous themes.

A particular advantage of using locally-managed subject headings for this collection is that they can be customised to suit the needs of our users and mirror the terminology they employ in their own academic and professional practice. We can also add terms that have local or cultural relevance, which may not be available in LCSH. For example, the OCLC record we imported for *The Secret of the Kelpie*² (Don, 2016) used the LCSH term 'Horses', which doesn't quite do justice to the nature of this mythical, shape-shifting creature. We replaced this in our catalogue record with the CTI term 'Kelpies'.

The use of pre-coordinated headings in LCSH can also make them unsuitable for use in this collection. Taking *The Lighthouse Keeper's Lunch*³ (Armitage & Armitage, 2007) as an example, the OCLC record includes the following LCSH entry:

650 #0 Lighthouse keepers †v Pictorial works †v Juvenile fiction.

The use of the subdivisions in subfields †v are not strictly necessary in our case. 'Juvenile fiction' is a given and could reasonably be applied to every book in the collection. 'Pictorial works' is arguably unnecessary too, since we group picture books together at a single classification number (although we do have a form term for 'Picture books' in the CTI that can be added to MARC field 655).

Time for an overhaul?

It is clear why the librarians at Jordanhill created the CTI and why its use continued after the two libraries merged, but it is worth noting that the index was created over 15 years ago and has only had irregular, ad hoc changes in that time. There has been a noticeable uptick in the number of change suggestions received in recent years, possibly attributable to an increased focus on the ethical aspects of our cataloguing and classification work. These change requests have mostly focused on EDI-related concerns such as removing outdated or offensive terminology and adding terms for topics not yet represented in the CTI.

The previous process for dealing with change requests was very informal. The decision on whether to approve or reject a request rested solely with the Cataloguing and Metadata Manager and was therefore open to that person's conscious and unconscious biases. This presented a particular problem when dealing with books covering sensitive or contentious subjects. From a technical standpoint, this haphazard method of approving or rejecting changes also led to some inconsistencies

¹ <https://suprimo.lib.strath.ac.uk/permalink/f/1vf34ij/SUALMA2148595810002996>

² <https://suprimo.lib.strath.ac.uk/permalink/f/12er6ft/SUALMA2174665170002996>

³ <https://suprimo.lib.strath.ac.uk/permalink/f/1vm6dnl/SUALMA2162802700002996>

and in general there was no broad overview of how the index should be structured and how terms should be applied. The CTI itself was simply an A-Z list of approved terms in a Word document, stored on a networked drive. There was no authority control for CTI terms in the Library Management System (LMS), and there was no integration with cataloguing workflows. This meant it was easy for spelling errors and unauthorised terms to creep into catalogue records. It was therefore decided in late 2023 that the Cataloguing and Metadata (C&M) team would undertake a thorough review of the CTI, with a view to addressing both the content of the index and the way in which CTI terms are managed and applied in the catalogue.

Reviewing the terminology

The primary purpose of this review was to make the terminology in CTI easier to understand, more current, more inclusive, and more representative of the collection. We began by dividing the terms in the previous version into broad categories, based on BISAC subject headings ([Book Industry Study Group, 2023](#)) and Thema subject categories ([Children's, Teenage and Educational, 2022](#)). The re-ordered index was copied into an Excel workbook on SharePoint and opened up to the C&M team for comments. Team members were asked to review every term in the index, and to make as many suggestions as they could. After a few months, during which time hundreds of suggestions were received, we began a series of long meetings to discuss the suggestions and collectively approve or reject each addition, change or deletion. This was the most time-consuming part of the project and involved some lengthy debates about the merits of individual terms. Throughout the project there was an emphasis on backing up changes with authoritative sources and we identified some key resources to use as evidence across the CTI. These are cited throughout the CTI files on GitHub (<https://github.com/strathcat/cti>), but it is worth highlighting the Inclusive Terminology Glossary ([Chew, 2023](#)), Homosaurus ([Homosaurus, 2025](#)), the Cataloguing Code of Ethics ([Cataloguing Ethics Steering Committee, 2021](#)), NHS Inform ([NHS Inform, 2024](#)), the SPECTRUM document on empowering language to talk about disability and disabled people ([SPECTRUM Centre for Independent Living, 2018](#)), and some of the university's own in-house guidelines on inclusive terminology ([Kaur, 2023](#); [School of Humanities Gender Equality, Diversity and Inclusion \(GEDI\) Committee, 2022](#); [University of Strathclyde, 2022](#)).

Once we were happy with this 'beta' version of the updated index, we began to approach colleagues outwith the C&M team for input. We consulted with the library's Research and Learning Support team and held meetings with members of staff from the Strathclyde Institute of Education. Although our academic colleagues did not engage with the spreadsheet to the same extent as the C&M team, they did provide some essential feedback in those meetings and flagged up some important internal resources which helped to ensure that the terminology in the revised CTI mirrors the language employed by the staff and students who use the Children's Books collection.

A key source of dissatisfaction with the previous version of the CTI was the lack of guidance or documentation about how the index should be managed. We were keen to avoid having to create an extensive technical manual and getting bogged down in semantic arguments, but we did need some simple rules to help enforce consistency in the CTI going forward. Some new rules were agreed, some devised at the very beginning of the project, and others arising out of discussions during the revision process:

1. As far as possible, CTI terms should be in simple English.
2. Change requests should be discussed by the C&M team in the first instance, but colleagues in the Library and beyond should be consulted if an easy consensus is not reached.
3. Topical and form terms should not be mixed. Form terms (e.g. the term 'Pop-up books' which describes the physical form of the book, not its subject matter) are managed in a separate list and recorded in MARC field 655 instead of 650.
4. A new term should not be added if the concept can be represented using a combination of existing terms (e.g. rather than creating a topical term for 'Dyslexic teenagers' we would expect cataloguers and users to use the existing terms 'Dyslexia' and 'Teenagers').
5. Nouns should be plural (e.g. 'Parrots', not 'Parrot').
6. Additions and changes to the index must be evidence-based and should be accompanied by a scope note where applicable. This helps current and future users to understand why we have chosen the terminology in each term.
7. Subject terms for names of people (MARC field 600), corporate bodies (MARC field 610) or geographic places (MARC field 651) are not in the scope of the CTI and should be recorded using LCSH.

Improving workflows

Once we had a revised list finalised, we began looking at how to improve the technical aspects of the management and use of the CTI. As mentioned above, the previous version of the CTI was a simple Word document; it was not available to anyone outside the C&M team and was not integrated with our LMS (Alma) or discovery platform (Primo). CTI terms were previously added to MARC field 690 (Local Subject Added Entry), which is not a controlled field and cannot be easily monitored in Alma. We decided to create a MARC Authority version of the CTI, which could be locally managed in Alma, meaning cataloguers could browse and select index terms in the Metadata Editor. Non-preferred terms in bibliographic records would be automatically corrected, and unauthorised terms would be flagged up in Alma's Authority Control Task List.

Using a combination of Excel and OpenRefine, the revised CTI was converted to a spreadsheet with each column mapped to a subfield of a MARC Authority record. This

was then converted to MARC format using the Delimited Text Translator in MarcEdit. Some additional work was required in MarcEdit, such as amending the Leader field and fields 003, 005, 008 and 040. Each term was also assigned a control number in control field 001 (using the 'Generate Control Numbers' tool), which helps with tracking future changes to the index, and makes it easier to import new versions to the LMS.

The next step was to import this file to Alma. After adding a new local authority in the Metadata Configuration menu and making it available in the Metadata Editor, an import profile was created which uses the 001 field of the incoming record as a match point. This means that when importing new versions of the CTI in future, Alma will match the old and new versions using the control numbers created in MarcEdit.



Figure 2: Browsing CTI terms in Alma's Metadata Editor. Selecting a non-preferred term (e.g. Hearing disorders) redirects the cataloguer to the relevant preferred term (e.g. Hearing impairments).

With the new authority records available in Alma, it was necessary to update the approximately 11,000 bibliographic records that still contained terms from the previous version of the CTI in uncontrolled 690 fields. This involved a combination of normalisation rules (to replace deprecated CTI terms for personal, corporate, and geographic names with their LCSH equivalents) and editing records in MarcEdit to run a series of bulk 'find and replace' jobs. As a final check, an indication rule was run on the full set of 11,000 bibliographic records to identify any that still included an old 690 field.

The situation we have now is that cataloguers can use the revised CTI in a controlled manner within Alma, and regular checks of the Authority Control Task List help to identify any errors. From its beginnings as a restricted Word document filled with outdated terminology, the CTI is now arguably one of the most tightly controlled and up-to-date parts of the entire catalogue.

Hearing impairments	
Authority (9813306937602996) Bibliographic Records(0)	
LDR	00510cz##a2200169ni#4500
005	20240501130754.0
008	240501#jeanznbnbaba#####a#ana#####d
001	9813306937602996
040	‡a StGIUS ‡b eng ‡c StGIUS ‡d StGIUS ‡f local
150	‡a Hearing impairments
450	‡a Hard of hearing
450	‡a Hearing disabilities
450	‡a Hearing disorders
450	‡a Hearing loss
550	‡w g ‡a Disability
670	‡a https://spectrumcil.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2018/02/ULO19-The-Language-of-Disability.pdf
035	‡a (StGIUS)CTItopical00315

Figure 3: The MARC authority record for CTI term 'Hearing impairments' in Alma. The source for this choice of terminology is shown in field 670.

Making the CTI more open

An important aim of this project was to make the CTI more open, transparent and accessible. Although the CTI has been revised with our specific collection and use case in mind (i.e. it is designed for staff and students of the Strathclyde Institute of Education, using a children's fiction collection with a bias towards Scottish education), we believe it can be of use to librarians and others working with similar collections elsewhere. With this in mind, one of the first things we did with the new MARC authority files was to add them to a GitHub repository (<https://github.com/strathcat/cti>) under a Creative Commons licence, and we hope our work will find some application outwith our own institution.

We have also made changes to the process for dealing with change requests and welcome suggestions from the C&M team and beyond via an online form (<https://forms.office.com/e/uGXaBM2EKq>). Suggestions can be submitted anonymously if preferred, but we do encourage requesters to submit an email address (to facilitate further discussion and requests for information) and some additional evidence (e.g. a note of which titles would be affected by the change, and any relevant citations or authoritative sources). Change requests are then discussed at the C&M team's weekly meetings. The decisions made using this process to date have been straightforward but as noted above in the new rules, we would look to involve colleagues from the Library and beyond if we could not reach a decision within the team.

In terms of future development, we are seeking to make it easier for users and library staff outwith the C&M team to search and browse the CTI. We are considering changes to the search and filter options on Primo to help with this, as well as adding some guidance for users to our existing LibGuides pages for the Children's Books collection.

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