

Improving Discoverability of Day Schools Records: Truth, Reconciliation, and Archival Practice

Canadian Research Knowledge Network
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DISCOVER. UNDERSTAND. CONNECT.



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Day Schools Project: Overview

- 2022–2026
- Digitization of 5.7 million pages
- One of Library and Archives Canada's (LAC) largest and most most complex digitization efforts



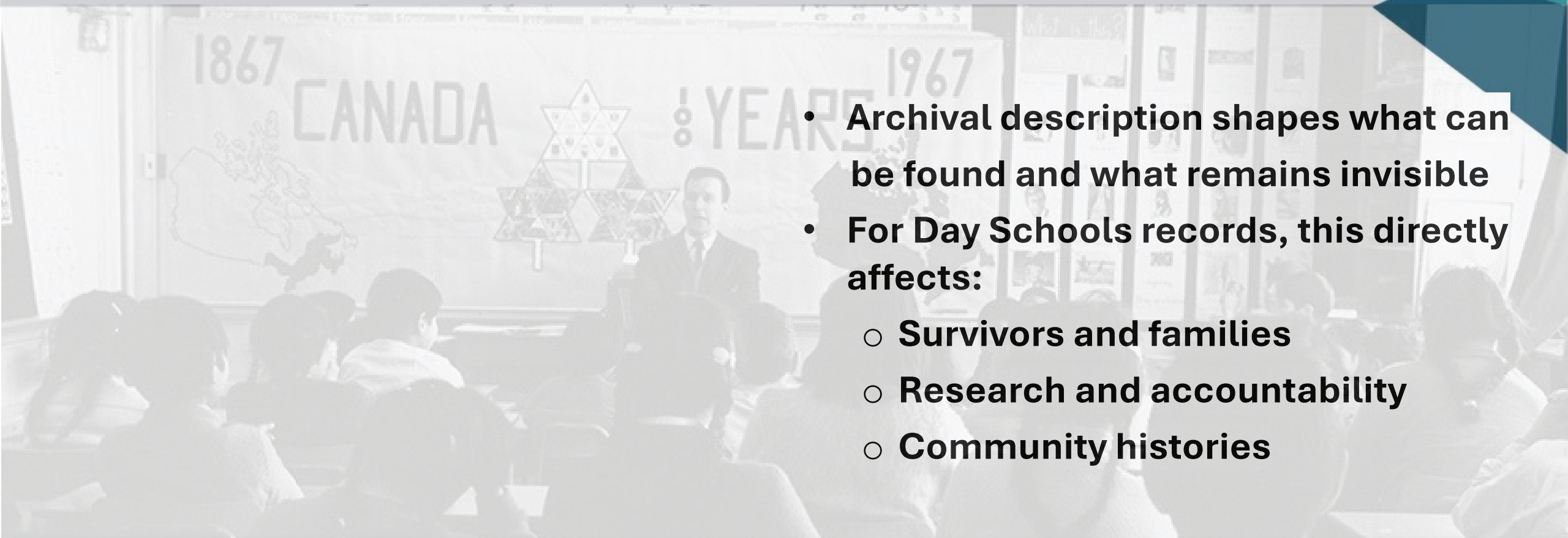
The Federal Indian Day Schools system

- Nationwide system (late 1800s–1990s)
- 200,000 First Nations, Inuit, and Métis Nation children
- Part of a broader colonial education system



Whatì (formerly Lac La Martre) Day School, Northwest Territories, 1957
Credit: Joseph Vincent Jacobson and family fonds / LAC / e011865146

Discoverability is not neutral

- 
- **Archival description shapes what can be found and what remains invisible**
 - **For Day Schools records, this directly affects:**
 - **Survivors and families**
 - **Research and accountability**
 - **Community histories**

Addressing the challenges

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FILE NO.

— INDIAN AFFAIRS BRANCH —
DEPARTMENT OF CITIZENSHIP AND IMMIGRATION

SUBJECT *R.C. May School*
Fort Alexander #4
Selkirk
B. CHIKOWSKI

VOLUME
FROM
TO

REFERENCE				DISPOSAL			
REFERRED To	By	REMARKS	DATE	PA OR DF	By	DATE	For C.R. Use

- Records created by the former Department of Indian Affairs
- Organized for administration, not people
- Description at accession level
- Limited metadata
- Incomplete, dispersed, hard to navigate

Working within and against the system

- Colonial classification structures persist
- Pressure to improve access without:
 - Overinterpreting
 - Rewriting records
- Ethical tension:
 - Upholding the records vs. responsibility to Survivors and researchers



New Caradoc Day School, Mount Elgin, Ontario, 1948

Credit: Canada. Dept. Indian and Northern Affairs / LAC / e011080348_s1

Not just digitization: intervention in description

We didn't change the records. We changed how they can be found.

Enhanced Descriptions

Typical file description LAC:

- Basic information: Title, dates, reference
- Contains a generic statement (general note field)
- No additional contextual information is provided
- Clients rely on finding aids when files have not been imported

DSP Enhanced File Level Descriptions include:

- Types of documents within each file
- Indigenous communities and school locations
- Names of schools and related institutions
- Presence of student names
- Presence of staff names
- Presence of specialized media (maps, photos, architectural plans, art etc.)

Scaling the Work: Infrastructure and Preparation

- Need to create file-level entries with their own unique identifier
- Imported ~300,000 file-level entries
- Made finding aids keyword searchable
- Verified, corrected and standardized metadata

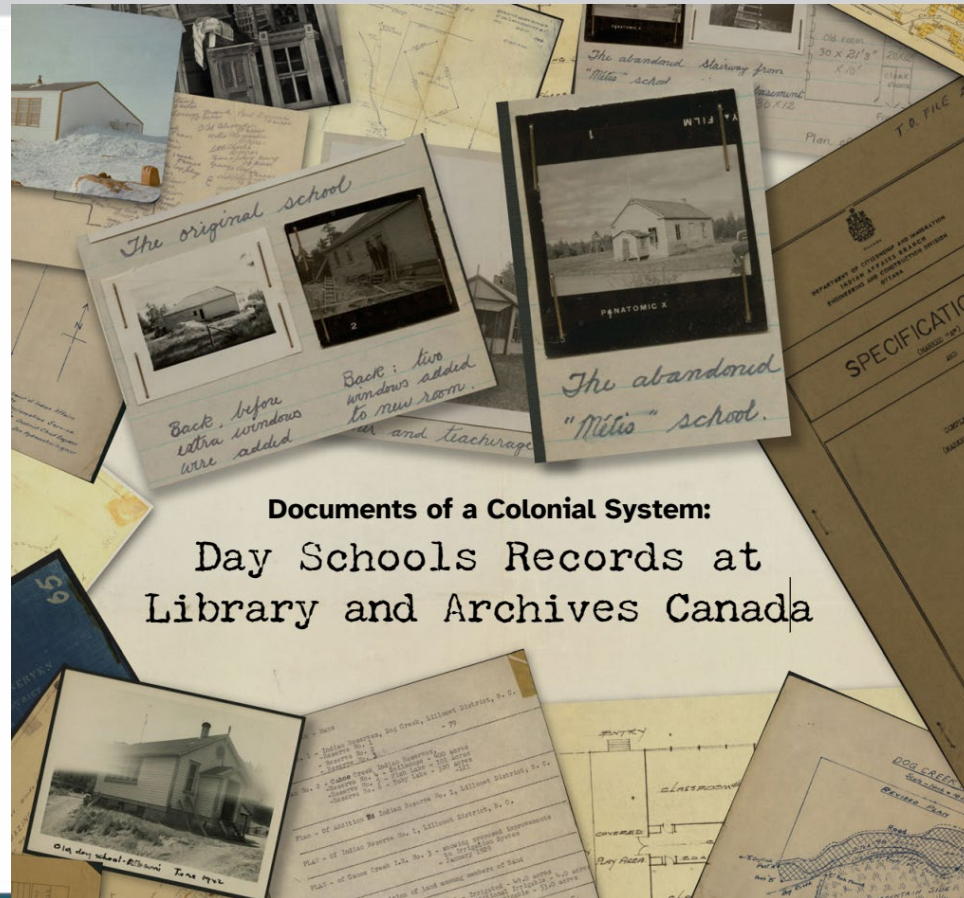
Limits of discoverability

- Some open records
- Majority restricted (privacy legislation)
- ATIP process required
- Enhanced descriptions = narrows research resulting in more efficient requests



Prefabricated Day School being delivered to location, Forest, Ontario, ca. 1967, e011794878

Supporting discoverability



- DSP overview
- DSP Research guide
- eBook: *Documents of a Colonial System*
- Blog posts
- Poster with QR codes

Enhancing search relevance through synonyms lists

Topic	Initial word count	Additional variations/synonyms
Day Schools	965	1144
Residential Schools	174	312
Métis communities	419	227
Indigenous Names (Peoples)	142	698
Indigenous place names	1975	2480
Forts	968	331

What the DSP's work demonstrates

- **File-level enhancement is scalable within legacy systems**
- **Small metadata changes can produce significant improvements in discoverability**
- **Meaningful change is possible within existing technical and organizational constraints**
- **DSP provides a model for improving description without system replacement**

Description as archival practice

- **Discoverability shapes how records are encountered and understood**
- **Archival systems determine what becomes visible and connected**
- **Description is a site of decision-making**
- **Reconciliation is embedded in archival practice**

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LAC's website: www.library-archives.canada.ca

DSP's webpage: [Day Schools Project \(canada.ca\)](http://Day Schools Project (canada.ca))

DSP email: projetsurleseexternats-dayschoolsproject@bac-lac.gc.ca

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