

The choice is Canadian

Annie Facchinetti compares the school systems of British Columbia and Victoria

Eating out in North America can be a source of trauma for the indecisive. What salad dressing do you want with that? Will you have jack, cheddar, Swiss or blue cheese? How do you want your eggs cooked – sunny side up, poached, over-easy, over-hard or scrambled? The choices can be bewildering for someone who is not used to being presented with so many options. But the real eye-opener for me during a recent trip to Canada and the US was the educational choices available to students and their parents.

British Columbia (BC) is a province on the west coast of Canada. With a total of 4.45 million (2009 government estimate), BC's population is smaller than the 5.47 million living in the Australian state of Victoria. But while approximately 30 per cent of Victorian school students attend non-government schools (independent and Catholic), only 12 per cent of BC students go to non-government schools. The breakdown of school types also suggests a significant disparity between the two regions – the Canadian province has 1809 public schools as against Victoria's 1585; Victoria has 707 independent and Catholic schools as against BC's 347.

So why are there so many more public schools in BC? The factors that influence the composition and direction of any education system are extremely complex. A brief look at public schools in BC does, however, reveal one glaring difference: the element of genuine choice for parents.

The British Columbia Ministry of Education takes the issue of choice very seriously. A brochure for parents looking for a school states: "All school districts offer some choices and most districts offer a number of choices, such as: traditional and alternative schools, Aboriginal education, French immersion, schools with a fine arts or athletic focus, and distance electronic learning where students can learn at home." Even at primary level (or elementary school, as it is known in Canada), students are offered a number of options within the public system.

Vicki Maras Kasapi teaches a Grade 1 class at King Traditional Elementary School in Abbotsford, 65 km south east of Vancouver and close to the Canada-US border. Her school is one of nearly 50 in the province that offer some form of what is termed "traditional" schooling. As the name suggests, traditional school programs feature structured learning coupled with what Kasapi refers to as "a huge emphasis on respect," and are underpinned by 10 tenets.

According to the Abbotsford School District



website, traditional schools have "a clearly defined code of conduct, detailing behavioural, academic and manner expectations." The philosophy behind this is that classrooms with fewer discipline issues have greater time to spend on teaching and learning. One of the hallmarks of a traditional school is that, unlike in other government schools, there is a dress

code that requires students to wear a school uniform.

Typically, the schools are also smaller – although King Traditional Elementary is the largest of the three K to Year 5 traditional schools in Abbotsford with around 370 students – to enable students to be "quickly known".

Traditional schools pride themselves on high

academic achievement, which is encouraged through methods that, while being child-centred, are a far cry from the child-directed inquiry learning currently favoured in Victorian primary schools. Vicki Kasapi explains that the students in her class sit in rows, and that the shape of each day is very structured. For example, her Grade 1 program includes a daily phonics session, a practice that is mandated in the School Plan.

The teaching for core subjects also follows a prescribed format of “lesson, guided practice, independent work”. Subjects such as science, social studies, art, personal planning and health are usually undertaken later in the day, and are not integrated through maths and literacy sessions.

Given the emphasis on behaviour, structure and academic results, you might be forgiven for assuming the traditional schools in Canada are similar to our selective schools in Australia. There are, however, two major differences. First, traditional schools run all the way from kindergarten to Year 12. King Traditional Elementary, for example, feeds into traditional middle and secondary schools in the Abbotsford district.

The second, and most obvious, difference is that traditional schools, and indeed all of the choice schools in Canada, are not selective. Instead, students are accepted on a first-come-best-dressed basis after registrations for the following year open. Kasapi relates how in the past, parents used to camp out to be first in line at particular schools. The process has since been modernised with phone-in or online registrations now used.

As part of its commitment to choice, the government of British Columbia allows students to “attend any public school in the province where there is space”, rather than having to go to the closest to home school. Still, according to Kasapi, for most students of mainstream government schools, “Where you live is where you go to school”. Choice schools, however, are more likely to draw their student populations from a wider area. Their popularity is clearly growing too. King Traditional Elementary has doubled the number of students attending since it was opened about eight years ago.

Incredibly, the British Columbia Ministry of Education’s mission to give parents true educational choice doesn’t end there. If parents find that the type of school they would like for their child is not available in their area, they are encouraged to take measures to establish one. A brochure explains the steps parents can follow, including approaching schools in other districts that already offer the choice they are interested in to find out how they went about establishing the school, and approaching the local school board to discuss the proposal.

It is therefore in many ways unsurprising that parental satisfaction with traditional schools is very high. King Traditional Elementary School’s profile on the Abbotsford School



The 10 Tenets of Traditional Schools

- 1 Consistent structured approach that maximises class time
 - 2 Strong focus on academic achievement
 - 3 Teacher directed instruction
 - 4 Regular skills assessment
 - 5 An emphasis on solid literacy skills
 - 6 A regular homework policy
 - 7 A clearly defined code of behaviour
 - 8 A dress code
 - 9 A safe environment
 - 10 Parents as partners
- Taken from South Poplar Traditional Elementary school website

District website boasts a long list of testimonials from happy parents. What comes through very strongly from the testimonials is not just the academic and disciplinary aspects, but the sense of community and belonging that exists within the school. Parents who choose to send their children there obviously care about education, and are willing to get involved in activities, from classroom help to “Meet the teacher pizza picnics”.

Despite this, the Abbotsford School District website freely acknowledges that: “The traditional program is clearly not for everyone”. This hardly matters, since in addition to the “standard” traditional, fine arts and language immersion programs, the Abbotsford district offers a range of options including academic and athletic choice schools, English as a Second Language, Summer School and even a K–12 Virtual School. Add to this a large number of mainstream schools and there is diversity in the public education system that we can only dream of.

Although this was my fourth time in Canada, before this visit, I had no inkling that the choice system even existed. And it made me start wondering about other interesting innovations in education around the world. Our former Education Minister, Julia Gillard, has been so intent on following a New York model that emphasises testing and results – and one, I might add, that has proven to be ineffectual – that we are being forced into an extremely narrow view of education and what it can and should be.

I’m certainly not claiming that Canada’s education system is flawless, it certainly has its fair share of standardised testing, but it’s a system that is actively trying to present a range of solutions to meet the needs of a broad spectrum of students. There must surely be more examples around the world of practices that support the diverse needs of learners in different ways.

We have an educational paradox in Australia where buzzwords such as “differentiated learning” are being bandied about in the midst of our one-size-fits-all testing and monitoring fixation. It’s often said that doctors make the worst patients; it would be sad to think that teachers, or at least those responsible for our educational direction, make the worst learners.