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The Trip to Canada. Schools in British Columbia and in Ontario "Accountability" - "Reading" - "Respect"

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Introductory remark

The following report of a study journey visiting schools and school boards in the Canadian provinces of British Columbia and Ontario (Sept. 5th - Oct. 1st in 2004) was written by Sibylle Volkholz, former head of the education department of the city state of Berlin. Ms. Volkholz has maintained good contacts with the German Institute for International Educational Research for many years. She presented this report in October to members of the German Institute's research project "Education Systems in Canada and Germany – An In-depth Comparison of System Governance and Educational Attainment", and later to a larger public in Berlin.

The Trip to Canada

Schools in British Columbia and in Ontario "Accountability" - "Reading" - "Respect"

Sybillle Volkholz

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Introduction

The visit to Canada originated in the desire to gain an insight into the way schools and school administration function, after Canadian students had scored so highly in the PISA study. Anna Sliwka and Cornelia Stern, two members of the Education Commission at the Heinrich – Böll-Foundation, and Professor Eugenie Samier, Associate Professor for Administration and Leadership at the Simon Fraser University, Vancouver helped to organise contacts in Canada.

For my part, the preparations for the visit involved the compilation of a catalogue of questions¹ and a brief cv which were sent to the contact persons in advance of my arrival.

The visit and report do not claim to be representational or scientific. The visit did, however, grant me the opportunity for an intensive exploration of schools and school administration, with observations in four school districts and fifteen schools in British Columbia and Ontario. For my part, I have acquired much new information and many valuable insights which have generated new ideas and reflections; it is to be hoped that the reader will find this report equally stimulating.

General Information

The Canadian school system is - similarly to the German system - federal in structure. At state level, there are few regulations governing performance levels and accreditations.

Each province is responsible for providing education. The guidelines in British Columbia and Ontario differ slightly and there are also differences in the administrative structure, but the regulations are very similar.

At provincial level, the curricula are determined. In British Columbia, performance standards are indicated separately, in Ontario they form part of the curriculum. The Special Needs Programs are also defined at ministerial level, as are the basic guidelines governing English as a Second Language (ESL). The most important guidelines are accessible on the respective homepages, www.gov.bc.ca and www.edu.gov.on.ca. The evaluation of the schools is carried out by an external agency. This is not the task of the school administration. The school administration is structured in districts - similar to the regional government districts in Germany. Each district has a Board of Education (elected trustees, part-time politicians), who appoint the director (or superintendent) of the School Board. The director or superintendent has the authority to appoint other superintendents and assistant superintendents. (The titles and the administrative structures in British Columbia and Ontario differ slightly. Ontario has abolished one of the administrative levels.)

¹ see Appendix 2

Population structures in the districts visited

Since everybody in Canada, apart from the First Nations, has an immigrant background, there are visible differences in the way the question of immigration is dealt with in Canada compared with Germany.

Diversity is a priority and is also obviously accepted by the population. It ranked first in a recent survey on the strengths of Canada. In the whole of Vancouver, no single population group has a majority. Thus far, the relationships between the different population groups are not majority-minorities relationships. This does not mean that racism does not exist, but the topic of immigration and the background in each specific case are dealt with as a matter of course. In addition, immigration is not equated with lower social status, this has been taken care of in Canada's immigration policies. Chinese immigrants, in particular, are often affluent and very performance-oriented. On the other hand, there is frequent discussion of the problems of "new immigrants" and also their problems at school.

The Richmond district in Vancouver has a high immigration rate, which has actually exploded over the last 20 years. Native English speakers form an absolute minority. In 1990, native speakers of other languages formed 40% of the population, today that figure has reached 70%. The socio-economic status is however relatively high. Previous municipal policy in Richmond has ensured that social housing has been spread all over the district. As a result, according to the School Boards, socially disadvantaged groups are not concentrated in any particular area. The West coast has a high proportion of immigrants from East Asia, but the numbers of immigrants from India, Pakistan and Afghanistan are also increasing. Where there is a high concentration of immigrants from India, and even more particularly, from Pakistan, there is however a higher indication of social and economic problems.

Vancouver District, with regard to the composition of the immigrant population, is more mixed and also includes urban districts with high concentrations of social welfare recipients. Surrey, in the south-east, has a high proportion of Indian immigrants.

York Region and Durham (north and north-east of Toronto) belong to the greater Toronto area; a large proportion of the inhabitants work in Toronto but live in districts outside Toronto. The populations are generally solid middle class, but in some cities there are also higher concentrations of social welfare recipients. There is also no correlation here with an immigrant background.

School Boards

Tasks and targets, instruments and working methods

The School Board is responsible for the implementation of ministerial guidelines, adherence to the curricula, the budget, the staff, school development and all external school facilities. The evaluation of test results and the conclusions to be drawn from these are dealt with in consultation with the school. The structure of the Boards differs slightly, e.g. Durham District has one director and ten superintendents, while York Region has an extra administrative level of coordinating superintendents.

The four school boards attach great importance to the separation of their work from the test procedures (EQAO). They each emphasise their own concept of themselves as providing support and consultation for the schools. For all of them, providing support for students and students' achievements are the primary objectives, immediately accompanied by educational objectives such as social responsibility and citizenship. The institutional means used by the four Boards differ slightly.

Test results are of differing importance for the Boards. While Richmond considers that the test results play a subordinate role in their work (at least at director level), in Durham, the data is very extensively processed. In addition to data collection, the information about the schools gathered through superintendents and through school visits is very important for all the Boards. In Durham, the school test results are subjected to intensive examination by the superintendents and consultative conferences are held with the schools with the aim of finding a correspondence between the grading and the results. A great deal of attention is paid

to the suitability of the criteria, and the teachers are involved in this work. School curricula, grading practice and standards are examined at Board level. Each school receives feedback on its grades compared with the district grades and the corresponding test results.

The tests in grade 3 and grade 6 (reading and writing), and in grade 9 (math) are for the purpose of system-monitoring; in grade 10, an individual certificate is awarded for the literacy test.

At Board level, in addition to tests, surveys are held among the students in the contexts of learning, satisfaction, joy in learning. Parents and the community are also consulted in the same way.

The schools receive the test data; summaries are published at district level. The schools must publish the EQOA results; they can make their own decisions regarding other publications. They are also permitted to publish information about their local community and the social situation of their environment, which they do.

The data forms the basis for development planning at both district and school levels. In Durham, for example, 42 schools (out of 126 in total) were identified as being in need of development. The Boards have either formed support teams or organised consultants, who are experts in specific fields, for the schools.

Vancouver has recently started to work with accountability contracts, in which the objectives to be achieved in the district in the coming years are formulated. These contracts are finalised between the Provincial Government and the Board; they are based on the plans for the school which the school has to give to the Board. These plans have to show the priorities for the coming year clearly. Every 3 years, the District is inspected. Little acceptance for these contracts is found as yet among principals and teachers.

Communication with the principals is considered very important. The principals select the staff for the schools, the contracts are finalised with the school boards and the salaries are paid by them. The Boards of Education negotiate the salaries and the teachers' working conditions with the Unions. The results are often met with mixed feelings in the schools. The principals are responsible for teacher evaluation, and the superintendents rely on them to do this. Negative sanctions are however used with great reserve if plans are not fulfilled or if results are poor. There is a generally held consensus that each individual wants to do his work well and this also extends to the teachers.

The appointment of the principals is an important steering instrument for the superintendents. Very precise plans are drawn up concerning which school should be given which principal, who is responsible and suitable for the development of each respective school. There are no elections. As a rule, principals remain in a school for 3-5 years, then they are moved.

This time period or its extension are topics of discussion today.

Cooperation with Universities

The Boards of Vancouver and York Region have partnerships with universities and their teacher training departments which are used not only for training and further education, but also for consultation and school development. York Region, for example, works with OISE (Toronto) on research-based school development projects; all levels are included in order that all may learn how to work with assessments and measurement procedures; teacher assessment is also carried out; the universities work very closely with the schools with regard to teacher education and training. (See: universities)

Funding and Finance

All the information related to finance and funding is given with the reservation that no solid comparison is offered between prices and the average salaries of other professions in Canada. In general, it seems to me that the cost of living in Canada is comparable with that in Germany. The costs of land and property seem to be considerably lower in Canada. (The budgets are available on the Internet)

At the beginning of the 1980s, there were, in addition to cuts in funding, changes in the system of funding education. The income from taxes was centralised at province level, the municipal authorities were not permitted to use tax income to raise additional means for education. The School Board in Vancouver has a total budget of \$400 million for 57, 000 students, 108 schools and 4000 teachers. Approximately 90% of the budget is for staff costs. Approximately \$6000 (€4000) is available for each student for each year. In the last 10 years, the budget has been cut by \$100 million.

Durham has a total budget of \$493,672,920 for 69,247 pupils and students, 127 schools and 4185 teachers; approximately \$5000 (€3500) is spent on each student.

Teachers' salaries: for new entrants to the profession at elementary schools, \$33,798 (€20,862) annually or €1738 monthly is shown in the annual budget (for salaried employees). This amount goes up to €2913 monthly for the highest band.

Teachers at secondary schools earn a starting salary of \$36,735 per year increasing to \$60,886 for the top band, that is, from €1890 to €3132 per month.

The average salary for the principal of a secondary school amounts to \$84,995 (€52,466). (Printed copies of contracts are available).

The lower costs per student are possibly due in part to the lower costs of land and buildings. The construction costs for a primary school for 450 children would amount to \$8 million; it is not surprising that the schools are generally larger, better and have more open spaces than in Germany.

The schools are allotted a budget according to the numbers of students. There are, however, needy schools with "priority-status" which are comparable with those schools receiving structure-supplements in Berlin.

In addition to salaries, class size is also negotiated with the Unions: this ranges from kindergartens with 20 children per group to Grade 8 with a maximum of 36 pupils.

English as Second Language (ESL) – Regulations in the Boards

The language skills of the new immigrants, or rather, their children, are tested by the School Board when the children start school. A three hour family assessment session takes place, for the purpose of gathering as much information as possible about family background, educational qualifications, and the socio-economic position of the family. The language skills of the children are assessed by a five-minute spoken test, a written grammar test and a short multiple-choice test; according to their results they are graded from 1-5 (1 for beginners and 5 for good language skills). The parents are given a recommendation concerning the further support to be provided by the school.

There are special ESL teachers, who, according to the number of students, are allocated to one or more schools. Regular conferences take place between the coordinators of the School Board and the ESL teachers, during which experiences are exchanged and materials are developed. The participants consider these conferences to be very helpful.

Parents are offered orientation workshops in the schools. For this work, the help of volunteers is frequently enlisted. These voluntary workers often have a similar immigrant background, (cultural interpreters-para-professionals) but have been living in Canada for a considerable number of years. They are frequently used as interpreters. The School Board works in cooperation with immigrant organisations. The volunteer centre in Vancouver provides support for the voluntary workers and is praised very highly.

Although according to general estimates, 5-7 years are required to learn a language, means are only provided for 4 years (Durham).

For children born in Canada, means are not provided, even if they do not speak any English. Nevertheless, many school boards offer support, e.g., for immigrants from Jamaica, on account of the dialect, or for immigrants from China, whose development is observed for a long time in order to improve pronunciation.

The heritage languages are not promoted in the schools (in the districts visited). Many immigrant organisations do however offer courses. In most cases, parents and children are recommended to take part.

Although a high drop-out rate among new immigrants is reported from the universities and in the press, there was little information available about this from the Boards. It was, however, stressed that this work was on-going.

Special Needs – Regulations in the Boards

Definitions of disability and the respective means of support are specified by the Ministries. Usually, 10%-12% of the children in a district are found to have special needs. (The high percentage obviously results from the inclusion of children with slight learning disabilities).

For 15 years, disabled children have been integrated in the districts. At the beginning of the 1990s, special classes were abolished. There has been little lasting opposition to this measure.

For the severely mentally disabled pupils, and for the deaf and the blind, there are boarding schools at provincial level, which are however, attended by less than one per cent.

For the severely disabled (2%-3%), additional means are provided by the Ministry of Education.

Fifty per cent of children with special pedagogical needs have learning difficulties, cases of autism are on the increase.

The school itself is permitted to regulate the organisation of the lessons. Parents are also asked to express their opinions.

Special pedagogical programmes

In each district there are special programs for value orientation and personal education, and to promote social responsibility. A great deal of material and further training is used in programmes which focus on respect, citizenship and leadership. Two of these are now given in some detail:

In **York Region**, “**Character Matters**” is a program which was developed for use in schools, but it has meanwhile been adopted by the community. The program targets respectful behaviour and a peaceful coexistence. It is based on the assumption that there is a relationship between social behaviour, the atmosphere in the classroom and schools and the students’ achievements (academics). (Martin Berkovitz) Thus activities involving respectful behaviour, practice in “how to listen” and Service Learning form part of the programme. Adults (especially teachers) have to act as role models for desirable behaviour and parents are also involved. Even teachers have to apologize, if they offend against the rules. In every school and on each Board, there are persons who are responsible for this program. It has been academically evaluated by Maurice J. Elias, USA (www.casel.org)

In **Durham**, “**Together we Light the Way**” (do not be distracted by the title) was developed by Sandra Dean, a school principal, for her school, and this programme is based on the same principles as the York Region program. The emphasis here is also placed on respectful behaviour and a good relationship with the community (Service Learning), “Creating Safe and Caring Learning Communities”. Cooperation with parents, and promotion of their parenting skills and abilities has been developed systematically. This programme has led to improvements in students’ achievements. This has been confirmed by academic evaluation. (The school was shown in “Problems are our Friends”, the film by Reinhard Kahl). In the meanwhile, the school has been closed down, but the program is well-known far beyond the borders of the district and is still being used.

Also in Durham, there is the Breakthrough Program developed by Caren Hume.

This is a special support program for weak readers in the 7th/8th grade (mostly male students). It works with materials and learning arrangements which offer students easy access to reading. The books are often horror or action stories, literature of a low level, but they obviously find acceptance among these students. There are short stories with open endings

and specially selected questions to seize the attention of the students. The main characters are, for example, famous sports stars or team chiefs, who are well known to the students. This material is intended to arouse the interest of these young people.

The atmosphere on these courses is more relaxed than in classroom learning, students are allowed to take food in, and very often they take part in role play games – parents are involved in this work, when possible. The program seems to be successful. One secondary school is said to have reduced the proportion of weak readers from 19% to 9%.

Schools

Impressions of the schools are characterized by welcome greetings and a friendly, open atmosphere.

Walking around the school is possible without any difficulties, there are often also parents in the schools; the classroom doors are open and there is nothing to hinder entry into these to observe teachers and students at work. The safety and well-being of the students is of great importance.

Organisation of teaching and classes

The times for starting and ending the school day are decided by the schools. In elementary schools, there are five time-hours of lessons every day plus one hour for lunch. Many schools offer day care.

In secondary schools, the teaching day lasts five and a half hours and there is a one hour lunch break. Most schools start between 8.30am and 9am and end between 2.30pm and 3.30 pm. The school buses then arrive at the elementary schools. The older students generally look after the younger ones, ensuring that they board the right buses. Teachers and principals are also present at this time to say good-bye.

Children usually bring their own food for lunch or there is a self-organised lunch program which must be paid for. The lunch is not offered by the state. Donations are given for needy children. In secondary schools, many students attend nearby fast food restaurants. Many schools run lunch services provided by students (cooperative education), which also have to be paid for.

School life is also characterized by rituals. Each morning starts with the national anthem “Oh Canada” and a poem or a thought for the day, which is relayed through the loudspeakers.

In addition to the welcome posters and the school-names, the important objectives of the school, e.g. literacy, social responsibility and respect are displayed prominently on the walls, with very detailed explanations of what these entail.

There is a special point concerning the start of the school year: for the first week, the teachers teach according to the old schedule, so that this week can be used to organise the new schedules.

Children may attend kindergarten when they reach the age of four (not compulsory); they are part of the elementary schools. Elementary school grades are numbered from 1 to 8; secondary schools extend from 9-12.

Class size: the number of children in kindergarten classes is 20, which increases to 26 in the first elementary classes. There is a maximum of 36 children per class at 8th grade. Class sizes are a result of contracts with the trade unions.

The school makes the decisions concerning the organisation of classes. For demographic reasons, there are often mixed-age learning groups, for example, if the number of students is too low to build homogenous classes. Sometimes there are mixed-age classes for pedagogical reasons. One of the schools visited was an Alternative School, working with very flexibly organised mixed-age groups ranging over three years in age.

Classes and teachers change every year and are sometimes mixed together in new constellations – without any extravagant display of emotion.

Between the ages of 4-5, children are introduced to the alphabet and they learn to read through play - the children seem to enjoy this very much.

Educational goals and strategies

Reading – Reading – Reading, Respect – Respect - Respect and Social Responsibility are very clearly formulated as goals in every school and advertised publicly on wall-posters in corridors, hallways and classrooms.

The goals are often defined very precisely, for example, “next year 2 % more of our students should perform better in the EQAO Tests“. There are numerous and specific activities to promote social responsibility. Even lower grade students in elementary schools have to enter into partnerships with still younger children, with activities lasting about 45 minutes a week. Peer and Buddy-Programs are very common: these involve older students reading and working with younger students. Students in the 5th Grade are responsible for looking after K-children during the lunch break. Students have to apply to become a peer and sign a contract. Some schools have a Service Club, which coordinates the voluntary work of the students. All students have to engage in a certain amount of voluntary work to obtain a certificate when they leave school. Leadership has a similar meaning and is taught as a course at 8th Grade.

Safety and trust, the well-being of the children is of great importance. Students and staff in the schools speak to each other in a friendly and caring way, many schools have the names of children published as a sign of respect. Every child has its place and is respected – this philosophy is very clearly presented.

Problems of discipline are dealt with very consistently and proactively. If parents or students exhibit aggressive behaviour, they are told very clearly that this is not acceptable at school. Clear guidelines and regulations are established which also have to be maintained by teachers serving as role models. This consensus has been achieved as a result of cooperation among the staff.

Students are rewarded for good behaviour. Rewards are either distributed at the end of a week or, after several weeks, teachers will prepare a meal for the students. These rituals are of great importance.

The different backgrounds of the students, their diversity, intentionally forms part of the curricula; a day might be selected as an “anti-racism day” or a week might be entitled “heritage-week”, to focus on the different backgrounds of the families, on black history or the history of the First Nations. Immigrant organisations are often invited to these events.

Impressions of Lessons

Students work very independently in groups or with materials on their own, even in the lower grades. Consistent efforts are made to ensure that they help each other and turn to each other for help before asking the teachers for assistance. Materials are available which are suited to different performance levels or students can choose to work at their own pace.

In many schools, teachers of two classes work in teams so that students are able to move between the classes and change their learning groups.

The curriculum guidelines in the provinces are formulated on the basis of competence requirements. In addition partly very detailed materials are provided showing the plans for every single lesson in this subject. These materials are offered but their use is not compulsory. Recommendations are made regarding teaching materials and there is a catalogue of approved materials, from which schools and teachers can choose. Materials are also purchased by the schools and also paid for by teachers themselves.

Teachers are usually given a thick file containing didactical proposals und lesson-plans including material for students, which only have to be copied.

Students are familiar with the curricula, and are also informed about the daily and weekly plans. The subjects and tasks are often related to the personal experiences of the students. Thus tasks are set, such as introducing the families to each other, which lead to research on the respective backgrounds of fellow students. The maths lessons at the beginning of the new school year started with mind-mapping: “maths about me”.

Tasks are often application-oriented: in “Conducting a Survey”, for example, students were required to carry out research on the preferences and behaviour patterns of their school friends. They had to choose the object of research, give an estimate of the expected results, and then carry out the interviews and present the results in diagram form..

To sum up, the friendly and supportive atmosphere is striking. Positive empowerment and respect are prevalent. “We are a group of very intelligent young people, we still have some difficulties with the language. But this we will manage soon” – was a typical introduction.

The greater proportion of the teaching consists of students working independently; this decreases in the higher grades, where instruction plays a greater role. Teachers look considerably more relaxed and visits are seldom disruptive.

Another general impression was of the relaxed but also very unquiet atmosphere: students move around a great deal, during the lessons there are loud-speaker announcements, the telephone rings, but none of this seems to disturb anybody. There is differentiation between good noise and bad noise.

Structure and Differentiation

Elementary schools include the grades from K to 8, secondary schools, grades 9 – 12. Elementary schools and their respective subsequent secondary schools build a school family. In British Columbia and in Ontario there are fixed catchments areas.

All schools emphasize the importance of integration, but there are also noticeable levels of differentiation. Most of these are decided by the schools.

In mixed-age classes, parts of the lessons are given to the whole class, other parts to groups of the same age.

Besides the facilities for students with special needs, provision is also made for specially gifted students: either in an independent class at a school with a special focus, as an additional course either at this school or as an additional course at the students' own schools. Parents are invited to choose between these offers. Schools are also able to decide whether they want to have such levels of differentiation.

Schools can also decide on their own, whether and how they differentiate between the achievement levels for different courses and subjects. Two of the schools visited work with courses at 4 different levels for reading and writing in Grades 1 to 3. One school has introduced these courses for one hour a day, the other for one and a half hours in homogeneous learning groups. One of these schools wants to introduce a similarly differentiated system for mathematics and for Grades 1 to 8. The allocation of students to the courses is evaluated monthly and is changed where necessary.

A variety of support options is available and it is also possible to vary the learning arrangements. Students are often given additional support in reading (also provided by volunteer helpers in one-to-one reading programs); students with difficulties in learning French, may, instead, be given additional support in writing and reading(English).

One school has a profile in Arts from Grade 6 to Grade 8. Students have to apply and have to show special abilities. For students resident in the catchment area, who do not take part in this Arts program, separate classes must be provided. Approximately half the students find places in the Arts classes, 98% of whom are girls from highly educated and affluent families. In probably all of the English-speaking provinces – I visited these in Ontario – there are French Immersion classes at some schools with this special focus. In Vancouver about 8 %

of elementary school students attend these classes, in Ontario the number is probably higher. These classes follow a streaming model beginning with the 1st Grade and half of the students at the school attend them. The lessons are bilingual. The parents who choose this option are usually better educated and performance-oriented. These classes present a clear social selection.

There are Catholic schools, with their own Catholic school boards, which are, however, also public schools and funded by the state, in contrast to private schools.

For children of the First Nations there are special schools in the Reservations and also special classes, but I did not visit these.

Conclusion: Obviously there are many more forms of differentiation in Canadian schools than are reported in the “Post-PISA-Publications”. Sometimes, allocations are very flexible and interchangeable, but sometimes there are fixed streaming models from Grades 1 to 8, sometimes even to Grade 12. These forms of differentiation obviously do not disrupt the supportive culture.

Schools carry out student assessments and student identifying processes almost continuously, to find out the needs of every individual and the additional support required..

Differentiation in Secondary Schools (9-12)

For the 9th and 10th Grades, regular courses are offered at three different levels (Academic, Applied, Open), in the 11th and 12th Grades, courses are oriented towards preparation for university, college or the work place. All subjects except for languages, mathematics, science, geography and history are available for all levels (are taught without differentiation).

There is a coordinator for the different courses who tests the students and decides on the allocation of the students to the respective levels. (In the past, students could decide this for themselves.)

In addition, schools offer a great variety of courses which can be chosen as options. Sometimes these courses are offered as “enrichment programs”. Some schools create extra classes for high achievers who have most of their lessons together, only being taught individual subjects with other students in individual cases

There is a pre-employment program which offers preparation for specific professions (e.g. training to be a cook or to run a restaurant). In two of the schools I visited, this program includes running a cafeteria which serves around 250 hot meals a day.

Another pre-employment option is cooperative education, comparable to our “Betriebspraktikum”, which lasts several weeks. Within this framework of working in enterprises, students obtain credit points which they need for the final exam/certification. (For 110 hours’ work they are awarded one credit point.)

Models similar to the “City as School” are operated with obvious success. (At one school nearly half of the students on this program obtained the necessary qualifications to attend college.)

Career Centre and Counsellors in Secondary Schools

All secondary schools have Career Centres, in large schools up to four staff members (teachers with additional qualification as counsellors) are responsible for advising students. Advice is offered on problems concerning course options, personal problems and career choices.

English as Second Language (ESL)

In BC and Ontario (excluding the district of Toronto) the heritage language of immigrant students is not taught in the schools, but is offered by immigrant organisations. Students are recommended to attend these courses. Most teachers found it impractical to offer so many different heritage languages.

ESL is a special subject and is available from the first grade. (In the Kindergarten, it is an integrated subject.

Schools receive the recommendations concerning the needs of immigrant students from the school boards. When the student starts to attend school, the ESL teacher and the teacher for special resources work together to assess the students and allocate them to learning groups. The goal is for the student to be fully integrated in regular classes as soon as possible.

The organisation of the lessons is decided by the schools; some ESL beginners are given between 10 and 18 lessons a week in a separate learning group. If necessary, one to one reading lessons are also given. The lessons are consistently carried out in English. The teaching materials are linked to the personality of the students and their families and are intended to stimulate communication within the group. (Exchange of information on their respective backgrounds or “my first cultural shock”)

In Richmond a special program(similar to City as School) has been developed for older immigrant students who have just moved to Canada; according to this program, students have to work in enterprises while attending school. This is intended to ease integration and also increase opportunities for a vocational perspective.

Little information was forthcoming from the schools concerning drop-out rates. This lack is however recognised as a problem by the schools. Most of them plan to improve their systems for obtaining and keeping information on former students.

Special Needs

Each school has teachers for special resources and education assistants who work with students with special needs. For students with severe disabilities there are special assistants.

Elementary schools obtain information on special needs from the kindergarten or they carry out their own tests when the children enter school. Individual education plans are then developed together with the parents.

For all the schools, the fullest possible integration of these students is the highest priority. Whether a student is taught in extra classes, and if so, to what extent, is decided by the school. Some schools have extra classes for children who cannot share the performance targets of the regular classes; this seems to occur fairly often in secondary schools. If necessary, extra support in reading is given in one to one situations.

Schools often have a special focus for special forms of disabilities.

Schools work hard to identify weak readers and develop intervention programs.

The majority of disabled students are learning disabled; most of these (90%) obtain a qualification. Colleges and universities run learning centres for disabled students.

Performance feedback

Most schools work with marks and reports.(these are given three times a year, but I am not sure if this applies generally) Many schools also work with individual reports on learning progress. Parents are given feed back on the children’s performance as often as they wish, often weekly. Several times a year, detailed information is offered at meetings.

At Board level and in the schools, there are elaborate procedures for the comparison of the self-assessments by students with the teachers’ assessments of performance and to discuss this with students and parents.

Cooperation with Parents

Cooperation with parents is well developed at many levels. At the representative levels (school councils) as well as at the respective individual levels there are many activities concerning individual children..

Each school has its parent advisory committee, which participates in school development and is also responsible for fund-raising. There are Parent Teas for consultation and communication, and also Parent Nights or Parent Raps. Many schools publish weekly bulletins or a “Friday Flyer”, which offers information on the most important events of the week.

Many schools offer parent workshops with discussions about educational goals and “parents as partners in education”. There are also workshops on special subjects like Maths or reading.

Parents receive a welcome package, “Welcome to Partnership”, containing important information, when their children start school. Nearly all schools offer “Reading Nights” with the communities. Everybody is invited to attend in pyjamas, approximately 50% of the parents take part in these events. “How to read with my child, one to one reading” is frequently discussed with parents.

At the beginning of the school year, there are “Curriculum Fairs” for parents together with their children, in which the curricula for the entire year are presented. This occasion is used to inform parents of the contribution that they are expected to make. Parents are often given the email addresses of teachers for easy contact.

In one of the schools visited, the principal herself visits those parents who do not take part in the Parents’ Nights or other events. They are told that the school community expects them to be active members.

Work with Volunteers

Schools work together with volunteers at various levels. Parents and students work as volunteers in one to one reading programs, in day care programs, extra activities and class trips. Parents quite often organize lunch programs, some of them offer support to teachers by copying materials and other services; the main office and the library is also often supported by volunteers. Volunteers also work with disabled students. Some schools offer training for their volunteers, but this is not always the case.

Schools cultivate their voluntary helpers in different ways: some schools distribute gifts once a year as a symbol of recognition and others organize events.

Most voluntary helpers are motivated not only through the desire to support their own children, but also to do something for others. They have access to more information about what is going on in the school than others, because they are more often present; they feel that their work is valued highly by the school. Their own children perform better, as a result of knowing their parents are present in the school.

Obviously there are some schools, where teachers feel that their work is disrupted by voluntary helpers.

Most of the communities have volunteer centres which coordinate the work, the support and the recognition of volunteers.

In most of the elementary schools – depending on the size and social mixture of their catchment areas – between 20 and 50 volunteers may be present at different times.

Cooperation with the Community and Enterprises

Schools are presented as public institutions. They feel that they are part of the community and the community in return also has this perception of schools. Important events, such as the meetings of the school council are often announced publicly in the form of advertisements.

All schools cooperate intensively with various institutions in the community, and with other organisations such as enterprises, either as a form of community council, or with various youth and social services, or in the framework of Service Learning undertaken by the students as a service for the community.

Within the framework of Cooperative Education, for example, students also work in enterprises and employers are often invited to visit schools as guest speakers. They also play an important role in fundraising.

Composition of staff, working hours and working conditions (of the teachers)

In addition to the teachers, there are also education assistants who mostly work with disabled children, but they also do some other work as well. The principals are part of the administration; the clerks and secretaries, the custodians and the librarian play an important role. In the elementary schools, the percentage of female employees is very high and their average age is about 35. They are able to retire at the age of 55, if they have been teaching for 35 years.

Working hours in elementary schools are 5 hours a day, with an additional hour for lunch. This includes 1 ½ hours preparation time. In addition, all teachers have to stay in school for 15 minutes before and 15 minutes after lessons. Working hours are the same in secondary schools, but cover 5 ½ hours a day.

For teachers in the secondary school, their work place is the classroom. The students have to move from room to room. For many teachers, it seems quite natural that they continue to work in school after lessons have ended, but this is not compulsory and is handled in different ways. (Wages are listed under the chapter on the Boards.)

The culture of recognition is not only looked after by teachers, they also receive recognition themselves. Generally, all the participants in the schools talk about each other in a very positive way. Principals present their teachers in a very positive light and the students also express great satisfaction with the support provided by their teachers.

Principals

Principals are part of the administration and not *primus inter pares*. In addition to their teaching qualifications, they also possess a Master's degree. Principals do not have to teach; whether the vice-principals have to teach is dependent on the size of the school. Principals are appointed to specific schools for the purpose of promoting school development. The relationship of the principals to the teaching staff is therefore of great importance for the work.

One of the key instruments is “leading by walking around”; walking through the school and visiting classes is the everyday work of principals and this is accepted by teachers as being quite normal.

Officially, the evaluation of teachers should be carried out every 3 years, but this cannot always be achieved. The criteria for the evaluation are negotiated with the trade unions and include teaching performance, knowledge, methods, information about students, working at school development, parental involvement and cooperation with colleagues.

The core tasks for principals are the evaluation of the EQAO-Tests, the conclusions to be drawn from these, and school development. They have the students' reports with the various grades/marks and have to compare these with the average grades and the test results in the district. On this basis, meetings are held with teachers to find explanations for the results and also opportunities for development. The results are also discussed in the different school departments.

Principals move to a different school every 3-5 years, but discussions are currently ongoing with regard to prolonging this time, in order to allow principals more time to become familiar with the schools.

School and Staff development

All schools have either “school planning councils” or “development committees” which consist of parents, principals, teachers and, in the secondary schools, also students. These councils and committees offer suggestions for the development of the school and for the further training of the teachers.

Further training for teachers is a duty and is also perceived as such; there is in-service training (6 days a year) in most schools.

One school has introduced the “Buddy-Day” for one and a half hours, and for two days a month; at these times, older students work with the younger ones. There is organised supervision. Time is thus won for in-service training. The Board has accepted this proposal and other schools will follow this example.

The schools watch their test results very closely and these are also criteria for development. Principals and teachers work at this through exchanges of teaching methods and teaching strategies. This includes exchange visits to lessons and making videos of lessons for mutual evaluation. The further training for this, which is run by the Board, is also very highly regarded.

School budget

Schools receive a global budget (for everything except the salaries and the building maintenance costs), which they may administer themselves. A small part of the budget has to be used for specific purposes. When needed, schools can also receive the energy-costs, but most of them do not want this. (What a pity!) For the average school, the budget amounts to about \$ 45, 000.

Schools may choose the teaching and learning materials from a catalogue of books and materials approved by the Ministry.

School buildings

Schools are usually spacious (Canada has space) and they have also large open spaces.

All schools have a library, which is always open for students, and they are the centre of the school. Schools are generally well equipped with computers – mostly there are several computers in each classroom with access to the internet.

In the elementary schools, classes have their own classrooms, there are specific rooms only for science, arts, music and gym.

In der Secondary School haben die Lehrkräfte ihre Fachräume, zu denen die Schüler kommen. Dies führt offensichtlich auch dazu, dass die Lehrkräfte als die „Gastgeber“ wahrgenommen werden. Ein Schulleiter äußerte sich über seine Zeit als Austauschschüler in Deutschland, dass offensichtlich die Schüler die Schule (und ihre Räume) beherrschten.

In the secondary schools, teachers have their own rooms for their special subjects, to which the students go. The teachers are clearly recognized as hosts. One principal talked about his rather different experiences as an exchange student in Germany, where students seem to dominate the schools (and the rooms.)

Information from Universities

Teacher training is organized in various ways: as a five year course leading to the Bachelor of Education degree, or as a course leading to a Bachelor of Arts degree with an additional one year Teaching Diploma or an additional two year Bachelor of Education degree..

This can be followed by a course of study leading to a Master's degree, which principals are expected to have gained; these studies are usually undertaken at the same time as working. Superintendents, in addition, almost always have a doctorate.

Teacher training is composed of courses in basic psychology, teaching and learning strategies, school and society, philosophy, sociology and anthropology. There are differences in teacher training between elementary schools and secondary schools; management and assessment strategies are emphasized more strongly in secondary schools.

During the teacher-training, universities cooperate very closely with schools. In York Region, in cooperation with the OISE, there are basic schools for teacher training. Students have to sit in classes (one day a week for three months), after which they gradually have to do more and more of the teaching themselves and also carry out small research tasks (observation tasks). Learning strategies are the main topic. One requirement for acceptance on a teacher training course is experience in working with children; trainees have to provide evidence of voluntary work.

Continuing teacher training is compulsory. Formerly, in Ontario, teachers had to produce evidence of credit points every five years, but this practice was abandoned by the current government. (With the aim of improving their poor relationship with the trade unions.)

The OISE - in cooperation with nine states in the USA – is working on a five year research study/project on the influence of leadership strategies and concepts of teachers on students' achievements. (Ken Leithwood and Blair Mascal are taking part in this study). All levels, from classroom teaching to politics are involved. The question as to whether the strict standardization of curricula (and guidelines) reduces the accountability of teachers will also be examined.

Diversity: obviously, in Canada as in Germany, there are discussions on the importance of the heritage languages for students with immigrant backgrounds. At the University of Toronto (Jim Cummings), the teaching of heritage languages is considered to be important in public schools as well, but this position is not translated into policy or into action in the schools in BC and Ontario. A research project, carried out over five years, has shown that there is a high drop-out rate among students who move to Canada when they are older. There is an obvious contradiction between the information provided by the Boards and schools with regard to this drop-out rate. It is possible that the schools which I visited have lower drop-out rates because they offer more and better support to their students.

Summary and Conclusions

Relationship between cognitive and personal/social competences

The visit to four school districts and fifteen schools cannot claim to be representative, particularly since none of these schools had student populations with severe difficulties. It may be concluded, however, that priority is given to creating and maintaining a good atmosphere in the schools. For students, in particular, there is a prevailing climate of recognition, reward and positive empowerment.

The schools view themselves as school-communities; well-being and safety are equally as important as lessons. Teaching materials are possibly of less importance than the supportive atmosphere. The positive expectation that: "Every child can learn - and will learn" ranks high on the list of priorities and may be the key to their success.

The individual person of every student as well as the relationships between the participants, are of great relevance for the learning processes and they receive attention in an appropriate way. Much time and work is devoted to assessment and identification procedures (diagnostic) to establish the strengths and weaknesses of the students – but always with the goal of improving support for them.

Independent learning processes and respectful behaviour are prevalent themes in the classroom. The fear – often expressed in Germany – that tests can dominate the lessons (teaching to the tests) is not confirmed by practice in Canadian schools.

The great importance attached to reading may certainly be one result of the test-culture, but it is also a very desirable result. Reading, reading, reading – is not only documented openly and everywhere on the walls, but features also as a main topic at all events. In addition to

this, school life involves a most wide and varied range of activities and – as already mentioned previously – great attention is focused on social behaviour, considerably more than in German schools.

It is also striking that the definition of acceptable behaviour in school is not left to the individual teachers' decisions, but is a result of a highly developed process of consensus building and there are very clear rules on behaviour which are binding upon all concerned.

Cooperation with parents is planned and achieved in a great variety of institutionalised ways. Parents are always kept informed and continually involved in school life; considerable influence is brought to bear on their attitudes to education and they are accepted as partners in education. This may be an important contribution towards the greater success of Canadian students in education

Relationship between external differentiation in achievement and interchangeability

In Canadian schools, there is - more than is recognized in German discussions (at least by me)- a great deal of differentiation according to achievement levels, but also differentiation in external forms, sometimes starting in the first grade. These methods are, for the most part, fairly interchangeable. There are also, however, clear streaming models (e.g. French Immersion Classes), which are not flexible. This is obviously not considered a problem, nor does it give rise to great debates.

The temporary settings of the students are decided by the schools. This is dealt with very pragmatically. In addition, the public perception of differences in achievement seems to occasion little excitement. In one school, for example, the learning progress made in the classroom by disabled children was publicly documented – and everybody was happy about this – even if the results were at a lower level than those of other students. (German data protection officials would have a lot of work in Canadian schools.)

The forms of differentiation do not seem to lead to children being pushed away onto other courses. They provide the initiative for supportive measures. It can be assumed that the constant control of the EQAO-Tests contributes towards this. Since the individual relief granted to teachers would have as its price the deterioration of the results of the school.

Problem of guidelines for very detailed lesson materials

Curricula in BC and Ontario are formulated as competence requirements and they also contain the expected performance standards. Materials for the subjects, which can be used as manuals for every individual lesson, are offered both by the Ministries and by the Boards. Schools can decide for themselves whether to use these or other materials. In fact, this often leads to standardized lessons, but these, through the high level of independent learning activities on the part of the students, allow great flexibility for different learning speeds.

Canadian teachers can manage lessons with little preparation – if they wish. My question as to whether these specific instructions can tempt teachers to neglect their own study of didactics and methods, was given a very understanding and positive reception. My partners in these discussions, however, gave me the impression that the exchange of information on teaching strategies within the schools tends to steer in the opposite direction. This is also supported by events, conferences and meetings at Board-level as well as through awards such as those for innovative teachers.

The materials which I was able to examine were very simple and oriented toward the lives of the students; some stories were so banal that they would hardly be considered for use in German schools. This, however, has quite obviously led to students being able to achieve their learning goals more easily. Most of the materials I was able to access contained very

clear methodical instructions, e.g. for cooperative learning, which are very helpful for the students.

Libraries

In addition to the atmosphere, content and learning strategies, libraries are the focus of attention in all schools and they are also widely used – particularly for the independent work of students. They offer many opportunities for reading. The importance of libraries is certainly underestimated in Germany and they should play a much greater role.

Pragmatism

Many questions concerning the organisation of lessons, the composition of classes, the differentiation of achievements, the language lessons for immigrant students etc. are dealt with by the school very pragmatically and they are not charged with great emotion. Communication among the participants is more oriented toward problem-solving and not toward attributing guilt. Schools are thus clearly empowered to seek and try out innovative paths. Traditionally, however, there is much more evaluation and assessment.

Autonomy of schools

With regard to content and performance standards, schools are required to follow clear guidelines. How the lessons are organised and how they work with the students is largely left to the schools themselves. They are, however, required to present a development plan showing how they can improve their test results. It is quite clear that as much as the school boards see themselves as supporters of the schools, so the schools feel themselves to be supported.

For the German debate, it is important to consider the role played by the principal and his/her importance in the development of the school. A great deal of knowledge about the school is concentrated in the principal, who also acts as an interface with the school administration.

Systems cannot (simply) be taken over and also rest on particular traditions, but it is quite clear that the responsibility, the obligation of all participants to be accountable, is of great importance for their actions. Both the administration and the schools work more transparently and with more positive expectations regarding all participants, which possibly offers some explanation for the positive results of the schools and students.

Berlin, November 6th 2004

Appendix 1: **Contact Partners**

School Boards

Richmond: Dr. Bruce Beirsto, Superintendent, Tony Carrigan: Coordinator ESL + Multiculturalism,
 Vancouver: Chris Kelly, Superintendent und Val Overgaard (ass. Superintendent)
 York Region, Denese Belchetz – koordinierende Superintendent; Beth Davies, Superintendent of
 Education, Jan Kielven, Character matters
 Durham: Craig Burch, Direktor, Luigia Ayotte, Superintendent of Education, Jaqui Steer, Staff Development Officer, David Midwood Assessment und Accountability Officer,
 Marlene Pike, Special Education officer, Lisa Miller, Pickering u. ESL-Administrator

Sandra Dean: Program “Together we light the way”

Schools

Richmond:

Ferris Elementary School, Faye Erbe, Principal
 Richmond secondary school: D. Macklam, Principal

Vancouver:

David Thompson Secondary , Ian Mackay, Principal
 Charles Dickens Elementary, John Perpich, Principal
 Surrey
 Senator Reid Elementary, Anne Warren
 York Region
 Devins Drive Elementary School, Lindy Zaretsky, Principal
 Aurora High School, Linda Balaicous, Principal, Richard Cherry, Viceprincipal
 Doncrest Elementary School, Daniel Wu Principal, Larry Fritz, Viceprincipal
 Baythorne Elementary School, Ruth Lambert, Principal, Mary Cousins, ehem.Viceprincipal, Kathy Lott, Viceprinzipal
 Markham Gateway Elementary, Virginia Dawson, Principal
 Durham
 Vincent Massai PC, Elementary, Carol Pattenden, Principal , Kris Hooper-Daoust, Viceprincipal
 Pine Ridge Secondary School, Sarah McDonald, Principal
 Bayview Heights PS, Heather Weber, Principal, Karla Wagner Viceprincipal
 Cadarackque PS, David Miller, Principal
 Sir Samuel Steele PS, Heather Britton, Principal

Universitäten

Simon Frasier University, Vancouver, Prof. Dr. Eugenie Samier, Faculty of Education
 OISE, Toronto, Reva Joshee, Brail Mascal
 OISE , Krista Walford – teacher trainings (an doncrest school)

To all of them I give my hearty thanks for their patience an great readiness informing me.

Appendix 2:

Sybille Volkholz, Coordinator of the Education Reform Commission of the Heinrich-Boell-Foundation

Questions to the Canadian School System:

Administration and schools/State and School

Regulations given by the state for the school system: National Curriculum, Standards and Certificates, what else? What are the most important steering instruments? System and practice of supervision or inspection; system of extern evaluation?

Qualification of Head teachers:

What is the content of the master studies? What is the special qualification of head teachers/ principals? School management, development of the staff, management and development of school quality, contacts to the social environment?

Schools and their pedagogical work:

School Curriculum, school program and – profile – to which extend can it be decided/ shaped by the school? Who is involved in the process of decision making?

What is the combination/mixture of the staff? What competences are available beside teachers?

Work with standards: Do you work with tests and school intern and extern comparisons of students achievement?

System and criteria of intern and external Evaluation

Special methods to support pupils/students, which are socially disadvantaged, students with a migrant background and students with special gifts? Are there special aspects of organising the learning groups, methods of differentiation? Are the learning groups, classroom strategies oriented to dealing with heterogeneity or the individuality of children/students?

Do you have special offers for students with a migrant background to promote the language development, English as second language? Do you have their mother language as an offer in the curriculum?

Do schools collect information about the further career of their students?

Who is responsible or accountable for the students achievement?

Contacts and Relations to Parents

In which way are parents involved in the pedagogical work with their children? Do there exist any institutionalised contacts or organizations?

Contacts and Relations to other social, cultural, economic institutions or enterprises?

Voluntary work in addition to the professional staff?