

Case Study Two

Character Education: a Canadian Perspective

Cassie Hallett DaSilva
(Secretary General, CTF)



CV

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Organization	Canadian Teachers Federation
Position	Secretary General



Cassandra Hallett DaSilva, a former Program Officer in CTF's International Program since 2003, is CTF's new Secretary General, effective January 2, 2015.

Better known as Cassie, she began her career as a teacher in 1992 (although family and friends pegged her as a teacher long before). Teaching took Cassie from her home province of Nova Scotia to the Northwest Territories, Nunavut, and, more recently, Tanzania; a teacher to the core, she will happily tell stories of wonderful experiences in each school she taught.

In addition to teaching, Cassie's career in education has included a variety of leadership roles. Before joining the CTF staff, she served as the first full-time Professional Development Coordinator in Nunavut and was an English Language Arts Coordinator for both the Kivalliq School Division and the Nunavut Department of Education. She was twice elected President of the Kivalliq regional teachers' association and also served on the central executive of both the Northwest Territories Teachers' Association (NWTTA) and the founding executive of the Nunavut Teachers' Association (NTA). She is a proud alumna of CTF's Project Overseas (1999 and 2002).

Cassie is a strong advocate for quality inclusive publicly funded public education and a proud mother to two elementary aged children who teach her a great deal each and every day.

Character Education: a Canadian Perspective

Good afternoon.

Before describing the Canadian educational context and offering some perspectives on character education from my organization and country, I want to take a minute to ask you each to answer the following questions silently or on a notepad. Given the number of questions and time available, you should budget your time to complete all three questions in 45 seconds.

1. What is empathy?

- a) Feeling what someone else feels
- b) Identifying what someone else feels
- c) Understanding what someone else feels
- d) All of the above
- e) None of the above

2. What is caring?

- a) Kindness
- b) Compassion
- c) Consideration
- d) All of the above
- e) None of the above

3. What is leadership?

- a) Guidance
- b) Management
- c) Direction
- d) All of the above
- e) None of the above

Thank you. The testing time is over. Please put your pens and pencils down.

I hope you realize that I will not be scoring your results. And although I also hope you didn't feel undue pressure to complete the questions or select the correct answers, I suspect many of you did feel some stress during this brief test.

I asked you to participate in that exercise to demonstrate what the Canadian Teachers' Federation (CTF) posits is a logical fallacy – that education systems can nurture well-rounded students in an environment increasingly driven by standardized tests. How could pages of multiple choice questions prepare children and youth to conduct themselves in caring, inclusive, equitable, and just ways? They couldn't. No test could, yet we can easily argue that all parents want the education system to foster these important positive characteristics in their children. Despite this, the increasing emphasis on externally moderated standardized tests and the potential or even pressure for teachers to “teach to” such tests, poses a significant threat to quality education and specifically character education and social justice.

In Canada, education is governed at the provincial and territorial level. This means that we have thirteen Ministries of Education each with their own Education Act and curricula. Canada is also a very multi-cultural country, with strong founding cultures: First Nations, Inuit, and Métis; along with English and French and many others whose families emigrated from around the globe recently or generations ago. Taking the sheer size of our country, its political structure and diverse cultural make-up into consideration, one might conclude that there would be little agreement in terms of educational pathways in Canada. However, that is not the case. Our national ethic of caring, compassion and equity, much of it transmitted through the public school system, has contributed to the social cohesion of Canada. That being said, I would be remiss if I did not acknowledge the appalling status of many First Nations, Métis, and Inuit people in Canada who currently do not enjoy social and economic conditions or a quality of education comparable to most other Canadians. This is a national disgrace. It is also, however, a problem that may over time, be corrected by a citizenry whose public schooling has been about more than academics and has been rooted in character education and social justice.

Across Canada, and at CTF, we share many core values regarding education. Among other beliefs, we believe deeply in the value of character education. In fact, our commitment to character education dates back decades before the actual term came into common usage. At CTF and, indeed, in teacher organizations across our country we are committed to ensuring teaching and learning is “student-centred”, focuses on developing the “whole child” and encourages each student to realize his or her

full potential – academically, socially, culturally, emotionally, and physically.

The CTF teacher belief statements include the following declaration:

- ◆ that the school curriculum is designed to prepare students to become caring, responsible and active citizens.

And CTF policy on Curriculum clearly articulates an emphasis on character education, with statements emphasizing the need for curricula to:

- ◆ be broad in scope and holistic in nature
- ◆ promote, support, enhance and model equity and respect for diversity
- ◆ be designed to prepare students to become caring, responsible and participatory members of society

In fact, policy from teacher organizations across Canada (from coast to coast to coast as we say), includes clear language regarding the necessity for character education and an emphasis on social justice throughout publicly funded public education. Our definition of quality includes character education. In this era of neo-liberalism with the increasing spread of the privatization and commercialization of school systems, publicly funded public education is being undermined and curriculum is being narrowed.

Teacher organizations are among the strongest defenders and promoters of universal high quality inclusive publicly funded public education. While some provincial and territorial governments, in Canada, encourage character education, none has yet recognized that a teacher's ability to nurture such social development is seriously compromised when the outcome of standardized tests is deemed to be more important than other aspects of teaching and learning. As I pointed out at the beginning of this talk, multiple-choice tests do not teach compassion, care, empathy, social justice or other essential components of character.

One of the programs of the Canadian Teachers' Federation is called *Imagineaction*. It is a student-driven social action initiative designed to nurture individual responsibility necessary for the development of socially just citizenship through engagement with our communities. The six *Imagineaction* themes: Connect, Engage, Thrive, Lead, Live, and Care encourage students to develop positive relationships; participate actively in their communities; take care of health and wellness; develop leadership skills; act as environmental stewards; and a take action to eliminate poverty.

Across our vast nation, there are many examples of teachers and teacher organizations focusing on character education. Along with our sister organizations across the globe and our global union, Education International, the Canadian Teachers' Federation calls on governments around the world to step away from narrow notions of curricula and an emphasis on standardized tests and to embrace a more holistic approach to education that is rooted in developing each student's character.

Thank you for giving me this opportunity to speak with you.

ENDNOTES

"You can't get to 'there' from 'here': Education as if learning and teaching matter, Bernie Froese-Germain

http://www.ctf-fce.ca/Research-Library/Educationasiflearningandteachingmatter_Dec16_2009final.pdf

<http://www.ctf-fce.ca/en/Pages/About/we-believe.aspx>

8.1. Curriculum must be broad in scope and holistic in nature in order to meet the needs of children, community and the larger society. (1998, 2014)

8.2. Curriculum must reflect realistic expectations based on knowledge of child development. (1998, 2014)

8.3. Curriculum must promote, support, enhance and model equity and respect for diversity. (1998, 2014)

8.4. Curriculum must be designed to prepare students to become caring, responsible and participatory members of society. (1998, 2014)

<http://www.ctf-fce.ca/Documents/Handbook/CTF-Handbook.pdf>

See for example:

Alberta Teachers' Association – The Mission of Public Education / A Vision for Public Education: Public education is the cornerstone of democracy. It must be founded on a commitment to educate all children well. Public education must foster and support the intellectual, social, physical, emotional and spiritual development of each child.

<http://www.teachers.ab.ca/SiteCollectionDocuments/ATA/Publications/Albertas-Education-System/Vision%20and%20Mission%20for%20Public%20Education.pdf>

Saskatchewan Teachers' Federation – 1.4 Goals of Publicly Funded Education (from the STF Governance Handbook)

(c) Publicly funded education must shape and enrich the character and life opportunities of each student.

(d) The Saskatchewan Teachers' Federation supports the curriculum-related Goals of Education for Saskatchewan (1984), as established by the provincial Ministry responsible for PreK-12 education through a public consultation process. goals affirm a student-centred, broadly based understanding of education which will prepare students to become knowledgeable, caring and responsible citizens.
<https://www.stf.sk.ca/portal.jsp?Sy3uQUnbK9L2RmSZs02CjVy0w7Zkl/ks6g2u00gzAtsk=F#https://www.stf.sk.ca/portal.jsp?Sy3uQUnbK9L2RmSZs02CjV/LfyjbyjsxsJmeY8rEcj/l=F>

Ontario English Catholic Teachers' Association – *When You Speak for Children...* OECTA Position Papers, 2013 – see section on “Learning goes beyond the basics”.

http://www.oecta.on.ca/wps/portal!/ut/p/c1/hY5PC4JAEMU_UczbMVb3qJFrIznWknqRJUQE_3SlOG-f0qWLNu8y8Htv5lFJkwb7ahv7bMfBdpRTKSuRbRXvYgauEuBzIFLFatrExAtZaRPsDYsEiZnKcGQ8beLIAfAnfZv__Ti0uThgpd11vUzol3_52v2ZY2F8r0cTSado7GsqqHQXe_qCiq5u7P1Njz5He9iEHwdllZk!/dl2/d1/L0USklna21BL0IKakFBTXlBQkVSQ0pBISEvWUZOQTFOSTUwLTVGd0EhIS83XzFSNDkyQ0wyMDBUNjAwMlBCMVE5MjkwMEExL2JCMDBkMTQwOTAwMDM!/?WCM_PORTLET=PC_7_1R492CL200T6002PB1Q92900A1_WCM&WCM_GLOBAL_CONTEXT=/wps/wcm/connect/web+content/OECTA/Issues+main/When+You+Speak+for+Children/

New Brunswick Teachers' Association – Code of Professional Conduct – the Code is based on a number of principles including the following (from the NBTA Members' Handbook):

- Teachers shall regard as their first obligation the student's physical, social, moral and educational growth.
- Teachers have regard for the dignity, liberty and integrity of students under their supervision and endeavour to convey to students an understanding of their own worth.

http://www.nbta.ca/resources/hand_book/NBTA_Handbook.pdf

British Columbia Teachers' Federation – among the goals of the BCTF (from the Members' Guide to the BC Teachers' Federation)

- To help ensure that public schools provide for the continued intellectual, physical, social, and emotional growth and development of each individual.

<https://www.bctf.ca/uploadedFiles/public/AboutUs/MembersGuide/guide.pdf>

See for example:

Finding Common Ground: Character Development in Ontario Schools, K-12, Ontario Ministry of Education, June 2008.

<http://www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/document/reports/literacy/booklet2008.pdf>

The Heart of the Matter: Character and Citizenship Education in Alberta Schools, Alberta Education, 2005.

<http://www.education.gov.ab.ca/charactered/>

Toronto District School Board – Character Development

<http://www.tdsb.on.ca/ElementarySchool/Theclassroom/CharacterDevelopment.aspx>

<https://www.imagine-action.ca/>