

THE DISCOURSE OF CHARACTER EDUCATION Ideology and Politics in the Proposal and Award of Federal Grants

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This study analyzes the ways in which character education has been articulated in the current character education movement. The study consists of a discourse analysis of proposals funded by the United States Department of Education's Office of Educational Research and Improvement. This analysis identifies the discourses employed to outline states' conceptions of character and character education as revealed through the proposals. The presentation consists of two profiles from sets of states that exhibit distinct conceptions of character and character education. One profile is created from two adjacent states in the American Deep South. We argue that this conception represents the dominant perspective promoted in the United States, one based on an authoritarian conception of character in which young people are indoctrinated into the value system of presumably virtuous adults through didactic instruction. The other profile comes from two adjacent states in the American Upper Midwest. This approach springs from a well-established yet currently marginal discourse about character, one that emphasizes attention to the whole environment in which character is developed and enacted and in which reflection on morality, rather than didactic instruction in a particular notion of character, is the primary instructional approach. The analysis of the discourse of character education is concerned with identifying the ideologies behind different beliefs about character and character education.

I think we ought to have character education in our schools. I know that doesn't directly talk about Hollywood, but it does reinforce the values you're teaching. Greatly expand character education funding so that public schools will teach children values, values which have stood the test of time.

Presidential candidate George W. Bush offered this view during the third debate of the

2000 presidential campaign (Commission on Presidential Debates Transcripts, 2000). His belief in the value of federally-funded character education programs, a project undertaken during the first Clinton administration and initially funded in 1996, was pursued through 2002, when the U.S. Department of Education's Office of Educational Research and Improvement (OERI) was disbanded under his

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administration. In this study we analyze the current character education movement as revealed through the discourses found in proposals submitted to OERI to fund character curricula. (For a more detailed account of this study, see Smagorinsky & Taxel, 2005.) We focus in particular on discourses that suggest two distinct conceptions of character and character education, one articulated by two states from the Deep South and one by two states from the Upper Midwest.

Our study suggests the ways in which the concept of character is culturally constructed, emerging from the belief systems historically developed in communities of practice. By focusing on these two distinct regions and their conceptions of character, we hope to place the character education movement at the turn of the twenty-first century in the context of historical notions about the nature of character and regional conceptions regarding the nature of societal organization.

Our notion of discourse shares Purpel's (1997) assumption that the current character education movement "represents an *ideological and political* movement rather than a debate about curricular and instructional matters" (p. 140; emphasis in original). To Gee (1990) discourse refers not simply to brief episodes of speech but "ways of being in the world" (p. 142). Discourse, in other words, embodies a political stance through which a worldview is enacted through tacit or explicit means, imparts a stance that it is impervious to question or criticism, and suggests the marginality or dubiousness of values and perspectives central to other discourses. Our study of OERI-funded character education curricula looks at discourse as ideological in Gee's sense. In reading the curricula, we found that each proposal implied an answer to one of Gee's major questions: "*what sort of social group do I intend to apprentice the learner into?*" (p. 45; emphasis in original). Students are not only being instructed about character, they are being socialized into a particular way of being and into the social groups who value those ways of being.

METHOD

Data Collection

We wrote to the state department of education of each state that had received an OERI grant for a character education curriculum, requesting documents that described its curriculum. Of the 31 states receiving funding at the time of our request, 11 provided documents. Of these 11, eight provided detailed information about their programs (including the proposal submitted to OERI) while three provided only brief pamphlets and/or fliers. In addition, we read Website descriptions of five other OERI-funded state initiatives. For the remaining funded state curricula, we were unable to get access to program descriptions.

Data Analysis

Question Generation

Following principles of the constant comparative method (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), we read the documents several times in order to generate our analytic questions. Initially, we read each set of documents provided by each state independently, using weekly meetings to discuss our impressions and begin generating questions. During this initial reading, for instance, we noted that many documents opened with some kind of declaration of youth depravity, citing figures on increases in teen violence, pregnancy, and drug use. Our informal characterization of this rhetorical approach was that they provided a rationale based on alarms about sex, drugs, and violence. From this observation, we became interested in the kinds of discourses in which each proposal was couched. Ultimately, we generated the provisional research question, "In which discourses is the document situated?"

In this initial reading we developed a set of analytic questions that included:

- What is the rationale for character education? (e.g., sex, drugs, and violence)
- What are described as the root causes of problem? (e.g., the Sixties)
- What are the anticipated effects of a character education initiative? (e.g., safe schools, orderly classrooms, virtuous citizens)
- What values do the curricula promote? (e.g., respect, justice)
- What is the source of those values? (e.g., community consensus, objective criteria of virtue)
- What assumptions about teaching and learning are behind the curricula? (e.g., didactic instruction will change students' character, students answer honestly to surveys about at-risk behavior)
- Whose character is at stake? (e.g., students', school community members', larger community members')
- How is character education implemented in the curriculum? (e.g., integrated in coursework)
- How is the program tied to other initiatives? (e.g., government programs, private foundations, local initiatives)
- How is the program's effectiveness assessed? (e.g., reduced disciplinary referrals, better grades) and how claims are substantiated? (e.g., testimony, statistics)

Using this framework to analyze the documents, we refined these questions in subsequent readings to interrogate what ultimately became the focus of the study.

In this article we inquire into the following questions:

1. In what ways are the proposals in dialog with the OERI Request for Proposals (RFP)?
2. In what broader discourses are the proposals situated?
3. Within these discourses, what assumptions are embedded?

Our continued rereading of the proposals according to these questions led us to recognize a continuum of beliefs about character and character education across the initiatives. Based on this recognition, we selected curricula that clearly articulated different conceptions of character and character education and decided to use them as the basis of the profiles that we present in this study.

Discourse Analysis

We read the documents together and discussed what was implied by the authors' declarations about the nature of character and of character education. For example, one state document specified the following groups as being particularly in need of character education: those of low-income status or below poverty guidelines, juvenile offenders, groups with high infant mortality, those with high teen birth rates, groups frequently charged with child abuse, those in economic distress, those exhibiting behavior problems, groups receiving free and reduced lunches, recipients of Title I funding, those with problems managing their anger and controlling their behavior, those who lack social and behavior skills, people who are geographically and socially isolated, people with limited English proficiency or speakers of "broken" English, the unemployed, recipients of food stamps, inhabitants of rural areas, those scoring below the state average on the Iowa Test of Basic Skills, speakers of the Cherokee language, minority students, students who are unsupervised after school, students with records of violence, students from single parent homes, students who are sexually active, and students from under-educated homes. We inferred from this list of at-risk students that the proposal authors believed that those most in need of character education were largely poor students from uneducated families in which standard English is not spoken at home. These young people, according to the proposals, tend to be sexually active, have histories of violence, abuse drugs, and have absentee parents. We further inferred

that the document authors assumed that people not fitting these categories were not particularly in need of character education. We then classified this discourse as being in the category of *class-based morality*. The remaining discourses that we identified comprise the major categories that we provide in our analysis of the character education programs from the two regions.

Classification of Proposals

Based on this analysis, we found that the proposals fell along a continuum. At one end were proposals with the following traits:

- Character is located within the individual.
- Character can be defined according to a set of stable, universal traits; moral relativism is to be shunned.
- Those most in need of character education are poor people of color and those with limited English proficiency.
- Character education proceeds didactically, with virtuous adults instructing children in proper moral behavior.

At the other end of the continuum were proposals in which

- Character is located in communities of people and is a shared responsibility.
- Character traits are generally stable but can vary situationally.
- Character education benefits all.
- Character education proceeds inductively and reflectively, with moral behavior emerging from consideration of moral situations.

Proposals tended to fall somewhere along this continuum, which are polarized according to the two major positions (didactic and individualistic; reflective and communitarian) found in academic publications propounding opinions about character education (e.g., Lickona's, 1991, endorsement of a didactic

approach; Smagorinsky's, 2000, outline of a reflective approach). For our report, we decided to take two proposals from each end of the continuum and provide profiles of them according to our research questions. By focusing on the most clearly articulated position at opposite ends of the continuum, we hope to identify the ideological nature of different conceptions of character and how to educate for its betterment.

Producing the Study

Following our analysis, we produced profiles of the two regions. These included attention both to the character education proposals themselves and to what we inferred to be the cultural factors contributing to their development. For instance, we noticed that the southern states' proposals emphasized civility (defined as good manners and deference to adults). On the other hand, the upper midwestern states emphasized agency, which might include questioning adults' authority. As former residents of the Upper Midwest and current residents of the Deep South, we saw a clear relation between these different ideologies and what we had understood to be the different cultures of the regions. Based on these informal observations, we began to look more deeply into the cultural context of each region and began to see many relations between local ideologies and local conceptions of character.

We also began to wonder how the OERI Request for Proposals (RFP) had influenced the proposals' conceptions of character. As we looked more closely at the RFP, we began to see its ideological orientation and wondered how it had come into being. Using the Web-based Congressional Record, we were able to trace congressional discussions of character back to the Aspen Conference hosted by Michael Josephson of the Josephson Institute of Ethics. Our investigation of the origins of the OERI RFP thus helped us identify its ideological origins and political trail through Congress.

These factors led to insights about the character education movement and informed our analysis. Our purpose in creating and contrasting these profiles of two distinct regions is not to construct a binary, but to identify the two most distinct conceptions of character revealed in the proposals and use them to understand the ideological nature of different notions of character. We hope that this effort contributes to what Knoblauch (1988) calls *dialectic inquiry*: “[T]he stipulation of ‘difference’ among competing classes is the fundamental ground of dialectic inquiry. In other words, what might be regarded as ‘the trap of oppositional thinking’ is also the very quality of dialectic that moves us toward enriched understandings and interpretive resolutions” (Nystrand, Greene, & Wiemelt, 1993, pp. 273-274). We hope that our outline of these distinct perspectives contributes to at least a trialectic as readers engage with these conceptions of character and seek their own resolutions and new understandings.

RESULTS

We begin by placing the proposals in dialog with the OERI RFP, the conversational turn with which the proposals needed to respond. We then outline the discourses within each region’s conception of character education, including both those shared and those that distinguished them from one another.

Social Construction of the OERI RFP

The event that defined the terms for OERI-funded character education programs was the production of the Aspen Declaration in July, 1992. The Aspen Declaration came out of the Aspen Conference, sponsored by the Josephson Institute of Ethics. The Aspen Conference produced an eight-point manifesto that summarized the participants’ views of character education, including the following:

- Effective character education is based on core ethical values rooted in demo-

cratic society, in particular, respect, responsibility, trustworthiness, justice and fairness, caring, and civic virtue and citizenship.

- These core ethical values transcend cultural, religious, and socioeconomic differences.
- Character education is, first and foremost, an obligation of families and faith communities, but schools and youth-service organizations also have a responsibility to help develop the character of young people. (<http://www.charactercounts.org/aspen.htm>)

These assumptions, for which we can find no empirical support, were explicitly adopted by members of the U.S. Congress to fund character education during the Clinton administration. We next describe how OERI incorporated these assumptions into its RFP for character education funding.

In order to fund character education, OERI needed to house the awards within one of its bureaucratic categories (see Figure 1 for the OERI RFP). The funding was placed under the auspices of the Funds for the Improvement of Education (FIE), the purpose of which is “to conduct nationally significant programs, to improve the quality of education, assist all students to meet challenging state content standards, and contribute to the achievement of national education goals.” Because the funding was located in the FIE, character education proposals were by necessity obligated to meet its criteria. All applicants for character education funding, therefore, had to claim that the programs would lead to increases in student academic achievement. The budget line itself (FIE) was designed to fund something other than character education, yet character education initiatives were bound to meet this budget line’s goals.

The bureaucratic decision to fund character education in a student achievement bill creates seemingly insoluble problems for states writing proposals, for they must claim that a character education curriculum will not only

Basic Information

Topical Heading: School Improvement

Administering Office: Office of Educational Research and Improvement (OERI)

CFDA #: 84.215

Program Title: Fund for the Improvement of Education (FIE)

Who May Apply(Categories): Institutions of Higher Education, Local Education Agencies, Nonprofit Organizations, Other Organizations and/or Agencies, State Education Agencies

Who May Apply(Specify): Other organizations include public and private organizations and institutions.

Current Competitions: The following information about competitions is based on the President's Budget request in FY 2000. This information will be updated when the FY 2000 appropriation bill is enacted. It is anticipated that a competition for State Partnerships for Character Education grants will be announced in December of 1999. Only state education agencies are eligible to apply for State Partnerships for Character Education Grants. Applications will most likely be due in February of 2000. The contact for this competition is Beverly Farrar (202) 219-1301. No other grant competitions for FY 2000 are planned at this time. The remainder of the funds will be used for continuation grants and other initiatives.

Type of Assistance(Categories): Discretionary/Competitive Grants, Contracts

Appropriations

Fiscal Year 1998: \$108,100,000

Fiscal Year 1999: \$139,000,000

Fiscal Year 2000: \$139,500,000

Awards Information

Number of New Awards Anticipated: 10 each year

Average Award: \$350,000

Range of Awards: \$100,000 - \$1,000,000

Note: The Department is not bound by any estimates in this notice.

Program Details

Legislative Citation: Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965 as amended, Title X, Part A, (20 U.S.C. 8001-8007)

Program Regulations: EDGAR, 34 CFR 700

Program Description: This program provides funds to conduct nationally significant programs to improve the quality of education, assist all students to meet challenging state content standards, and contribute to the achievement of the National Education Goals.

Types of Projects: Among the programs supported through FIE competitions are State Partnerships for Character Education, which are designed to teach caring, civic virtue and citizenship, justice and fairness, respect, responsibility, and trustworthiness to elementary and secondary students. FIE also supports the Blue Ribbon Schools program which identifies and gives public recognition to outstanding public and private schools throughout the United States. FIE also makes a grant to the Council of Chief State School Officers to operate the Christa McAuliffe Fellowship program that awards fellowships to outstanding teachers. In FY 1999, there will be one competition under FIE for State Partnerships for Character Education as described above.

Education Level: K-12

Subject Index: Academic Standards, Academic Subjects, Demonstration Programs, Educational Assessment, Educational Change, Educational Improvement, Educational Innovation, Elementary Secondary Education, Recognition (Achievement)

FIGURE 1
Office of Educational Research and Improvement Request for Proposal

improve character but grades and standardized test scores as well. The proposals submitted to OERI must therefore claim an effect that is nearly impossible to document, given that in a school environment there are too many variables at work to link student achievement empirically to a character education curriculum. Yet without such a claim in the proposal, a state could not get funded; and without some claim of success in an annual report, the chance of getting a grant refunded would be compromised.

Furthermore—and ideologically significant—the proposals needed to accept the Aspen Declaration’s axiom, which was institutionalized in the OERI RFP, that their programs should be “designed to teach caring, civic virtue and citizenship, justice and fairness, respect, responsibility, and trustworthiness to elementary and secondary students.” This idea that there are invariant, culture-free dimensions to character was, we found, far more congenial to the conception of character proposed in the Deep South than to that outlined in the Upper Midwest. We next review the discourses we identified in these distinct regions and the ideologies that they incorporate.

The Discourses of the Deep South’s Conception of Character Education

Cultural Context

Both states featured in this category are geographically and culturally located in the Deep South, an area generally considered to consist of Alabama, Georgia, Louisiana, Mississippi, North Carolina, and South Carolina, and more broadly including parts of Arkansas, Florida, Tennessee, Texas, and Virginia. Before proceeding, we should affirm that we wish to avoid regional stereotyping; we fully recognize that any U.S. state is composed of diverse people and that there is disagreement among its citizenry on many issues. *In identifying a regional culture, we are focusing on*

what we see as the dominant culture inscribed in the OERI proposals.

One of our reviewers suggested that we specify more clearly which cultures within these regions provide the perspectives that undergird the proposals, pointing out, for instance, that what we characterize as a southern culture is more properly the culture of the rural and suburban South rather than the urban (and largely minority) South. Undoubtedly, this more specific categorization is accurate; in one of the southern states’ proposals, for instance, the authors identified a goal of including minority representation in the second year of the program, suggesting that the original and enduring conception of character was that of the dominant white middle class majority, demographically situated more in suburbs and rural communities than large cities. Even this generalization does not hold up well under scrutiny, given the increasing diversity of suburbs and presence of many rural communities of primarily African American makeup, often characterized by poverty (Kandel, 2004). Our goal again is not to essentialize or overgeneralize the populations or ideology of any U.S. region but to argue that there is a relation between established, dominant cultures in the two regions we profile and the ideologies that we identify in their character curricula.

We have identified a set of characteristics of what we understand to be within the dominant culture of this region that were compatible with the ideologies written into the OERI proposals:

Religion. Both states included in this profile are considered a part of the Bible Belt, that part of the nation that runs across the South and is largely Christian and particularly Southern Baptist. In one of the two states, the director of the character education initiative was identified as a “lay minister” who authored a self-published book called *Teaching Jack and Jill Right vs. Wrong in the Homes and Schools*. A number of values associated with the Southern Baptist church were evident in the proposals,

particularly the hierarchical social structure (e.g., women are limited in the role they may play) and longtime opposition to civil rights for African Americans (Blake, 2003).

Race. The term *plantation mentality* is still used to describe caste-like social structures in which a small group of elites oversee and oppress larger groups not born into privilege, wealth, and power (Boyle, 1996). Both states from which we derive our profile were part of the original Confederacy and have histories of slavery, segregation, lynchings, Jim Crow laws, civil rights violations, and other racial inequities committed by Whites against Blacks. This region was also party to the forced removal of indigenous people under the presidency of Tennessean Andrew Jackson. To this day both states still have active groups defending the Confederate heritage, displaying the Confederate battle flag, and in more radical cases seeking Southern independence (see, e.g., The Southern Independence Movement, n.d., <http://www.southernindependence.com/>). The legacy of racial inequity is still manifested in the poverty and educational levels of Blacks and Whites in each state:

Over 90% of the executions that have been carried out in the last 20 years have been in the states of the Old Confederacy.... 98.4 percent of those serving life sentences in [one state] for a second conviction for sale or possession with intent to distribute certain narcotics are African American. Only 27 percent of [this state's] population is African American. Virtually every report that has examined the operation of the death penalty has found racial discrimination and arbitrariness in its infliction. As a result of this discrimination, one-third of African American men between the ages of 18 and 30 are under some type of court supervision. By the turn of the [twenty-first] century one half of all African American men will be in prison or jail, on probation or parole. The majority of victims of crime in many southern jurisdictions are people of color and an even greater majority of those accused of crimes are people of color. Yet despite the importance of the operation of the criminal jus-

tice systems to the African American community, most of the decisions in the system are made by white people. (Southern Center for Human Rights, <http://www.schr.org/center-info/>)

Poverty. As noted by the Center for the Study of the American South, persistent poverty is among the greatest concerns facing southern states. The U.S. Census Bureau (2000) reports that of the four major regions in the United States (Northeast, Midwest, South, West), the South has the highest poverty rate (13.1% compared to the national average of 11.8%), with 12.5 million people living in poverty. The two states profiled in this section had 13.7% and 12.8% of their populations living in poverty. All states regarded as part of the Deep South or Old Confederacy had poverty rates higher than the U.S. average.

Civility. The Center for the Study of the American South identifies a decline in civility as a major concern among Southern states. Southern manners and hospitality are part of the lore of the South. Undoubtedly there is great variation among Southerners in the degree to which they practice civility. The extension of mannerly relations has also been a selective custom; witness, for example, the historic brutality by Whites toward African Americans and forced removal of indigenous people. Yet its consistent identification as a southern tradition suggests that it has been at least an ideal, however inconsistent its application.

Summary. These factors were evident in the southern states' authoritarian conception of character, in which student obedience was a strong indicator of good character, as evidenced by assessments documenting the decline in disciplinary measures. The southern states also targeted low-income communities of color for character education, suggesting that race and poverty were associated with behaviors indicative of low character. The southern states further emphasized good man-

ners, particularly courteous behavior directed from young people to adults, who themselves were cast as models of virtue.

Discourses Common to Both Approaches

We next identify the discourses in the southern states' proposals that were also shared by the states from the Upper Midwest. We see these shared discourses emanating both from mutual values and from the necessity among all states submitting proposals to work in dialog with the OERI RFP; we disagree with the authors of the Aspen Declaration that these values are universal and culture-free.

Academic Achievement. In compliance with the RFP's mandate to improve academic success, the proposals claimed that their character curricula would maintain or improve student academic achievement. One document argued that an effective character intervention would "provide important support for the academic mission of schools by reducing problems of school violence, improving discipline and raising student achievement. National surveys of schools with effective character education programs show substantial improvements in student-teacher relationships, student discipline, classroom and playground behavior, student attendance, and even student test scores"; details of these national surveys were not provided. The programs' goals are well summarized in one document's bold-faced, centered, prominently located declaration:

Effective character education is a doable job which improves students' behavior, makes schools more civil communities, and leads to improved academic performance.

What these claims overlook is that, even if grades and test scores were to rise concurrent with the implementation of a character curriculum, it would not be possible to establish a causal correlation between the two. The proposals also do not mention the Hawthorne

effect, which posits that improvement is possible because of the introduction of something new, regardless of what that might be.

Moral Absoluteness. In the abstract of its program, one document we studied refers to its "alignment with the universal values that have been identified in both the federal statute and the [state] character education legislation." This rhetoric of moral absoluteness was streamed throughout the proposals. As noted, the curricula adopted the RFP's six chosen character traits, as would be expected. Other claims solidified the proposal authors' belief in the constancy of these traits. This view of the rightness of certain values illustrates well the discourse of moral absoluteness. It is on display in a "Quote of the Day" offered as part of an exemplary language arts and literature curriculum: "No one has a right to do as he pleases, except when he pleases to do right."

Another illustration of the discourse of moral absoluteness comes in the documents' insistence on a clear distinction between Right and Wrong. One state describes the issue by quoting its state superintendent of education as saying, "We need a clear, consistent and emphatic focus in society on knowing right from wrong, and choosing right. Schools have always had an important role to play in reinforcing that emphasis, and we have never needed their contribution more." The Right vs. Wrong dichotomy is played out in one state's "Character Education in the Curriculum" document, which asserts that in the reading of literature, students ought to read about exemplary moral characters, rather than complex ones or negative examples. The Center for the 4th and 5th Rs's belief that "encouraging right behavior, and correcting wrongful actions" exemplifies the clear distinction that many character educators make between good and bad choices, with no suggestion that the judgment of right and wrong might be complex or relative.

We see several implications of this recommendation. One is that there is a single kind of morality that can be exemplified. Another is

that one is either moral or not; moral dilemmas can then easily be resolved by adhering to the presumably universal traits of responsibility, respect, and so on. We also see an implication that books such as *The Catcher in the Rye*, with the morally complex protagonist Holden Caulfield, would be excluded from the curriculum and possibly banned from the library, as has happened often in the past. The curriculum from this state includes recommendations for character education lesson plans. In one, students are instructed to revise stories so that they conclude with more peaceful, respectful, responsible, satisfactory endings. We thus see the discourse of moral absoluteness reducing the complexity that many people believe to be inherent to the human condition to a set of clear, unambiguous choices.

The Protestant Work Ethic. The documents we studied outlined expectations for students in terms of the virtue of work. One document spells out the following required aspects of character to be included in the state-mandated character curriculum:

- Work Ethic: belief that work is good and that everyone who can, should work
- Punctuality: being on time for attendance and tasks
- Accomplishment: appreciation for completing a task
- Cooperation: working with others for mutual benefit
- Dependability: reliability; trustworthiness
- Diligence: attentiveness; persistence; perseverance
- Pride: dignity; self-respect; doing one's best
- Productivity: supporting one's self; contributing to society
- Creativity: exhibiting an entrepreneurial spirit; inventiveness; originality; not bound by the norm
- School pride: playing a contributing role in maintaining and improving all aspects of a school's environment, programs

and activities within the context of contributing to the betterment of the city, county, and state

We see a the clear relation established between virtue and capitalism through the emphasis on productivity, punctuality, task completion, the entrepreneurial spirit, and other traits relating to free-market values. This notion of economy is linked to a value on nationalism, with productivity of the individual associated with school pride: Through hard work youngsters can produce the machinery that in turn contributes to better homes, communities, and nations.

Another illustration of the Protestant work ethic comes in one state's adoption of a staff development model, Covey's (1990) "7 Habits of Highly Effective People" training program, licensed by the state and described as "a perfect fit" with The Eleven Principles of Effective Character Education developed by Tom Lickona, Eric Schaps, and Catherine Lewis for the Character Education Partnership (n.d.). According to the document,

Dr. Covey has created a model that puts a premium on ethical functioning. As Larry Wilson has stated when referencing the 7 Habits material, "Not only does the 'character ethic' win hands down every time over the 'personality ethic' in the battle of effectiveness, it also will bring greater fulfillment and joy to individuals seeking meaning in their personal and professional lives."

We infer from this document that the "personality ethic" refers to an ethic of self-fulfillment, what Sykes (1992) and other critics of liberal education might consider self-indulgence, self-celebration, and self-centeredness at the expense of productive labor. Covey's work is designed to help people improve personal and professional management and form quality relationships with other people. We see the state's decision to approach character education from the standpoint of providing better business management principles as being

well-aligned with the discourse of the Protestant work ethic.

Family First. Many character curricula we analyzed share a belief in the home as the principal arena for the teaching of morality. One curriculum from the Deep South recognizes “the primary role of the home in character development”; the other reports extensively on a model curriculum in an elementary school in which “Central to character education ... is the belief that the family is the primary influence on young children. Parents, therefore, are the most powerful role models.” Furthermore, parents should teach “righteous ideas and ideals.” The document says later that “Parents are a child’s first and most important moral teachers. The school must do everything it can to support parents in this role.” Parents are involved “in setting expectations in terms of behavior” for children to follow.

Yet the documents also reveal a belief that homes are not always good environments for teaching morality. The same document that identifies parents as a child’s primary moral teachers says that the schools must “battle the negative effects of the unsupportive environments that some children call home,” which turn out to be the homes of poor and minority children. One irony of this discourse is that if homes were doing a good job of teaching character, there would be no need for a character curriculum in school. We see this as a fundamental tension in the documents: one discourse stressing family first yet a rationale for character education based on youth depravity and class-based morality.

One issue that the curricula overlook is the fact that families may depart from the nuclear family that the proposals idealize. One proposal states that it aims to “Help high schoolers—someday to be parents—learn the responsibilities and commitments of marriage and parenting and how to care for young children.” This heteronormative claim precludes the idea that gay and lesbian students can have character—it refers only to heterosexual students headed toward marriage and parenthood.

Not all people, however, are heterosexual or aspire to marriage or parenthood. The curricula are mute on the existence of such people and on the ways in which they might experience an environment in which their own lives and identities are not merely omitted but characterized as unnatural.

Class-based Morality. In the rationale for a character curriculum, certain types of families are identified as deficient. One state, for instance, targeted for character education an area in a rural setting with a 70% minority population and six public housing projects. According to documents describing the character curriculum,

Our children associate with people every day who do not live by the codes we live by here. The greatest challenge we face is to ensure that our children learn to transfer skills and habits of character into environments that don’t support them.... [Following character education] We see a difference in the children’s understanding of what character is. They come to school without any skills at all. They don’t know manners, how to express their feelings appropriately. No one talks to them much. What we see now is their ability to handle things, to work cooperatively, to come up with a product without arguing. They share in the effort and reap the benefits. We see growth, especially in children with emotional behavioral problems. We have seen remarkable changes.

Other documents we studied shared this belief that those most in need of character education were from poor backgrounds, did not speak standard English, were from a cultural or racial minority, and otherwise departed from the White middle class values that govern U.S. schools. In the preceding paragraph “we” speaks on behalf of a particular group of people, those who represent the middle class values of the schools. They are positioned hieratically relative to “they”: those who come to school with a different enculturation to appropriate social behavior, who are viewed in deficit to “our” values, and who and are in

need of education so they may adopt “the codes we live by here.”

Logical Positivism. The character curricula we studied relied on the discourse of logical positivism to make claims about the replicability and sustainability of their programs and their programs’ potential for serving as national models for other states to adopt. The notion of producing a replicable model is clearly stated throughout the documents. One state, after describing the breadth of its efforts to institute a character curriculum, says that “As a result, the timing is perfect for the development of carefully validated character education models through the Partnerships in Character Education Pilot Projects.... We have a powerful national model of both interagency cooperation and public/private partnerships, with great potential for replication in all fifty states.” This discourse assumes that if it is demonstrated as effective in one setting, a curriculum could be exported wholesale as a “model” to be administered in another.

The notion of validation is also central to the character curricula we studied. One state sought to develop “Three state validated K-12 character education models.... Our intent is to demonstrate that effective character education will be related to the communities [sic] core values. There are basic principles of effective character education but no single script for quality implementation efforts.” We see a tension in the proposals between the goal of developing replicable models and their emphasis on local control, described by one state “as one of DOE’s priorities.”

Another recurrent term in the program descriptions was that of “dissemination,” for example, “the [State] Innovation Program ... has become highly successful in developing, evaluating, and disseminating effective programs,” and “All programs will also be validated, with information disseminated through the character education clearinghouse.” This affiliation with values of logical positivism assumes that what works in one setting is rep-

licable in others, regardless of the situational variables that might produce different results and effects.

Discourses Particular to the Deep South

Youth Depravity. The two southern states used a rhetorical strategy of asserting the depravity of youth as a rationale for funding a character curriculum. One state began by saying that it “ranks number one in teenage pregnancy, [the state’s major city] leads the nation in violent crime statistics, [the state’s major city’s] young black males are more likely to die from violence than from all others causes of death combined, [the state’s] students have consistently scored in the bottom quartile on standardized tests, dropout rates are high and prisons and youth detention centers are filling up faster than they can be built.” They continued, “Character development is a key intervention with the young people who come under the supervision” of the Department of Juvenile Justice. The increasingly degenerate character of youth must be addressed, say the proposals, and a character curriculum is the means for reversing the moral decline.

They assert that the effectiveness of a character curriculum can be determined by, among other measures, changes in the deviant behavior, evidenced by decreases in the number of discipline referrals, dropout rates, juvenile delinquency rates, and student pregnancy rates; and changes in prosocial behavior, evidenced by increases in participation in extracurricular activities, student volunteerism, and community perceptions of student behavior and activities. As Eckert (1989) might argue, students from the upper and middle classes are more likely to take part in extracurricular activities, leading to the conclusion that such students are of higher character than those whose disaffiliation with the school institution leads them to spend their time at work and with peer groups outside the sanction of school.

Authoritarian Society. One document we studied included the following curricular idea: to study “Effects of colors on behavior, i.e. Do some make us quiet?” We understood this lesson to mean that a good child of exemplary character is a quiet one. The same curriculum document asserted that in mathematics, students exhibit character by using “Self-discipline in using formulas and correct processes.” This value was part of another discourse streamed throughout the documents, one that equated good character with obedience to established authority. For example, one of the state documents identified, in addition to the core traits specified by the RFP, a host of traits that included patriotism, punctuality, and school pride. In this discourse, it is presumed that a good person is one who does not cause trouble or upset the established order of things.

This discourse fits well with general authoritarian conceptions of schooling that have a top-down administrative structure that places students and their interests at the bottom. Student-centered approaches to teaching and learning are often reviled by critics who feel that schools ought to transmit and assess an established culture and its values and history, rather than have students engage in a process of discovery in the Deweyan tradition. Adopting a more business-oriented approach to schooling, with tests of accountability in meeting external standards, is often advocated in this approach (e.g., Finn, 2000). An authoritarian society, then, not only positions authority at the top but employs measures to keep its agencies (e.g., schools) and actors (e.g., school personnel and students) in line with its priorities.

The Good Old Days. Character education curricula often employ the discourse of the good old days. The lay minister who directs one southern state’s character education curriculum is quoted as saying, “When people reminisce about ‘the good old days,’ their nostalgia usually reflects the bygone values of a

saner, simpler time in history. Character education provides a cornerstone to enable upcoming generations to return to those values in a realistic way. Character education could be the saving of America’s future—one child at a time.” Character education, the state superintendent of education says, is “not as much a new focus for schools and teachers as a return to one of our most traditional roles.”

How good the old days were, however, is a matter of perspective. In one of the states profiled, there were 531 recorded lynchings and other mob slayings between 1882 and 1964—roughly 6.5 per year—among the 4,700 or so lynchings nationwide during that period, according to the Tuskegee University archives. The exclusion of people of color from the process of developing the proposal makes it possible for the dominant culture members to view the old days as good; the use of the Royal We is exclusionary in terms of the life experiences of those for whom the old days were decidedly bad.

The Virtuous Individual. The lay minister’s belief that “Character education could be the saving of America’s future—one child at a time” is indicative of the discourse of the virtuous individual. The nation is composed of a collection of individuals who either do or do not possess character, and the objective of character education is to instill the proper traits in those who do not. A principal included in the other southern state’s pilot program wrote a letter of support for the proposal, saying that her school “continues with two ambitious goals related to student behavior: (1) Zero suspensions for all students, and (2) Reduction in the number of students referred to the office for disruptive behavior.” This emphasis on modifying the behavior of individual students is consistent with the discourse of the virtuous (or in this case, virtuous-in-waiting) individual, with conformity to authoritarian expectations serving as proof of the effectiveness of the character curriculum.

Summary

Our primary concern in this section is to identify the assumptions made about the location of character, which include the idea that character is the province of individuals whose morality may be improved through exposure to the character curriculum. This discourse is complemented by the discourse of the Protestant work ethic (increased classroom productivity and ability to compete in the workplace) and academic achievement (students reach their full academic potential). By focusing on individual deficiencies in character, the character initiative will help the community to become a better place. In contrast, the states of the Upper Midwest assume that by creating a stronger, more moral community, individual students will gravitate to socially acceptable moral norms through their engagement with other morally sensitive people.

The Discourses of the Upper Midwest's Conception of Character Education

Cultural Context

The Upper Midwest is an area adjacent to the westernmost Great Lakes, defined most narrowly as encompassing Michigan, Minnesota, and Wisconsin and most broadly as including these states along with northern Illinois, Iowa, Montana, Nebraska, North Dakota, and South Dakota (Ostergren, 1987). At times the proposals from this region exhibited a strain between following the RFP's requirements and instituting a reflective approach that involved local decision-making based on Deweyan principles of experience-based learning. We found other tensions as well between the general Deweyan focus of the upper midwestern states and other forces at work in the articulation of the character curriculum. We next review more specifically how the states from the Upper Midwest characterized character education in their proposals in terms of the discourses we identified in their requests for OERI funds, particularly as a con-

sequence of their settlement by German and Scandinavian immigrants following and concurrent with the submission of the region's indigenous people.

Vox Populi Political Movements. The growth of industry and mechanization between the close of the Civil War and 1890 brought about changes in agricultural communities and contributed to the development of a distinct regional culture in the Upper Midwest. These developments threatened to stratify society along clearer social class lines, the very situation that the immigrants sought to escape by coming to the United States. The German and Scandinavian immigrants appreciated the United States' lack of a hereditary aristocracy, its more fluid class structure, and its stress on individual achievement. At the same time, they opposed the United States' emphasis on wealth as the primary measure of success, which they believed fostered an ethic of greed, predation, oppression, social injustice, and social class distinction.

The Upper Midwest was home to a host of socialist and communitarian social movements and became a center for union activism. Movements originating in this region included the Farmers' Alliances, National Colored Alliance and the Colored Farmers National Alliance and Co-Operative Union, the National Grange of the Patrons of Husbandry, the progressive politics of Hazen Pingree in Michigan and Robert "Fighting Bob" La Follette in Wisconsin, the Socialist Movement in Milwaukee, Governor Floyd B. Olson's socialist Farmer-Labor party in Minnesota, the Anti-Monopoly and Greenback-Labor political parties, Finnish American political groups and newspapers with socialist and communist orientations, and the progressive causes of liberal agitator Waldemar Ager. All of these organizations and individuals opposed social hierarchies, fought for workers' rights, tried to regulate monopolies, established cooperatives, lobbied for a graduated income tax, and otherwise sought to create more democratic institutions and relationships with the particular aim

of redistributing wealth and moderating upper class privilege.

Religion. The two states profiled from the Upper Midwest are similar in religious makeup, with Catholics, Lutherans, and Methodists constituting the majority of Christian denominations in the states. We next review what we see as relevant tenets of these faiths as a way to understand the value systems that undergird the conceptions of character education developed by these states.

The three dominant Christian faiths in these states share a compassion toward society's forsaken. Catholics have historically condemned the injustices of the economic and social conditions created by the industrial economy, on both the domestic and international levels, and have sought to remedy them through charitable works. The communities of faith that predominate in these Upper Midwestern states share key values. Whether as a primary emphasis or a consequence of devotion, all believe in the power of good works, particularly those designed to help the poor achieve basic human rights and a decent standard of living. Of the three, the Catholic church most closely resembles the Southern Baptist church in its hierarchical organization; Lutherans and Methodists emphasize worshippers' personal relationships with God and allow greater access to positions of authority within the church.

Cooperative Communities. While adapting to U.S. ways, the German and Scandinavian immigrants also imported and retained important aspects of their home cultures. They maintained their linguistic heritages and promoted their traditional cultures through church, education, and community functions. Home and family were important for survival among individual families; and religion, education, and community contributed to the survival of communities. For Germans settling in the Upper Midwest,

Land was not just part of the physical environment but the very basis of Cosmol-

ogy.... Land was seen as an insurance policy. In the days before mechanization, it could only be farmed successfully if you could rely on the cooperation of others. The household or "whole house" [Hoffuss] was the ideal vehicle for ensuring this. Only given this cooperation could the household survive over a number of generations and secure its members a definite place in the village. (Wilke & Wagner, 1981, p. 126)

This observation suggests the cooperative nature of agrarian life in the Upper Midwest, both within and among families. Wilke and Wagner (1981) go on to discuss how seasonal farm work was accomplished through cooperation between cow and goat farmers, resulting in a *cooperation for survival* theme in the lives of German American communities. These farmers relied on cooperation with one another in order to survive the vicissitudes of weather and economy. Their dependence on one another, along with their inclination to bond with fellow immigrants, contributed to a strong sense of community in these settlements.

Summary. Although the states from the Upper Midwest are hardly uniform in terms of their present-day adherence to the values of their European settlers—the paradigmatic midwestern city of Chicago, for instance, remains highly segregated by race (Skertic & Dedman, 2001)—vestiges of their social structures are evident in modern society and the character education proposals we studied. The Iowa political caucuses, to name but one example, illustrate the percolatory decision-making process that characterizes the populist politics of many Whites who originally settled the region. We next outline how these values were evident in the proposals submitted to OERI for character education funding.

Discourses Common to Both Approaches

As we will note, we see a greater ideological tension with the upper midwestern states' assertions of these discourses than we found in

the southern states' proposals. We infer that the reason for this tension is that, while they need to place their proposals in dialog with the OERI RFP, these values were at times contradictory to the values central to their conception of character education which were articulated elsewhere in their proposals.

Academic Achievement. As required by the OERI RFP, both states from the Upper Midwest promised that students' academic achievement would be enhanced as a consequence of their character education initiatives. As one state's proposal said, among their goals is to "keep us evaluating and designing a more informed approach to increasing student achievement through student engagement and climate/culture issues." Increased achievement in this state's conception was, consistent with other aspects of the program, linked to factors in the environment rather than to attributes of individual students. Toward this end they identified a focus on "the vision of developing a caring community for all learners thereby increasing student achievement through student engagement and a positive school culture and climate undergirded by a strong evaluation component to guide the next steps toward the vision." This environment included both high expectations for behavior and academics and strong role models among the adults in the community:

Students are expected to do their best and experience success. All students and staff are expected to model positive behaviors that embody good citizenship. For students to make the most of their potential, the adults who surround them at home and at school must encourage and expect achievement. Clear expectations for behavior and performance provide students with a picture of the kind of person they and their families want them to be. Having that vision reinforced over and over by teachers and caregivers becomes a self-fulfilling prophesy that helps children overcome difficulties and challenges. Likewise, adults in the school setting should be expected to do their best and model appropriate behaviors. High expectations for youth and adults help

everyone in school strive to create an ideal that promotes the best in each person.

Here the discourse of academic achievement is linked to other discourses, particularly citizenship but also including relationships, suggesting a relation among these qualities. A good citizen is one who contributes to the greater good through high achievement and acting with care toward fellow community members. As stated in the other state's proposal, a chief objective was to "Continue to link funding streams in order to capitalize on the synergistic effect of connecting all school improvement efforts into a systemic whole and to promote the connections between positive character development and the achievement of high academic success for all learners," a goal that many might find to be painfully expressed in the jargon of educationese.

The authors of this proposal claimed to have found an empirical link between character and achievement:

There is a direct correlation between the development of positive character traits (which are often conceptualized by the educational community as "essential learning" or what we want students to be able to know, do, and be like when they graduate; by business, industry, and professional community as "work force readiness skills" which allow them to be meaningful contributors to the effectiveness of the work place; by the faith community as "core values" which define what it means to be fully human; and by parents as simply "being a good kid") and academic achievement. Recent findings from the cognitive sciences and brain research point to the importance of linking positive character development and academic achievement. By promoting positive character development through an integration into district essential learnings and content standards and benchmarks, and through using curricular materials which invite ethical decision-making and complex reasoning skills, we will promote a wiser and more compassionate group of graduates.

The correlation appears to be inferred rather than empirically demonstrated; no references

were provided to support this claim, while other claims in the proposal were indexed to citations from scholarship. Consistent with the proposals from the Deep South, those from the Upper Midwest made claims of correlations between character improvement and academic achievement without providing any supporting evidence.

Moral Absoluteness. In compliance with the OERI RFP, each state identified a set of core values central to their character education initiatives. “Good citizens,” said one, “can be counted on to consistently demonstrate honesty, respect, courage, and other core citizenship values in everyday life.” The other state wove its essential traits into a set of broader characteristics that it hoped to encourage in students:

[T]he elements of character are incorporated in the student outcomes or essential learnings:

- Effective Communicator—caring, justice, respect, responsibility, trustworthiness
- Collaborative Worker—civility, virtue/citizenship, respect, responsibility, trustworthiness
- Effective Problem Solver—justice, respect, fairness, responsibility, trustworthiness
- All linked with the individual school/community content standards in Math and Literacy

By instilling these traits in young people, claimed the proposal, school systems could achieve the broader goal required by the OERI RFP, an increase in academic achievement.

These values within the discourse of moral absoluteness appear to be in conflict with the discourses of local control and community that also permeated the proposals. While asserting the existence of core values, these states also declared that the virtues that drive their character education programs will be defined “by staff and students alike and set the standard for acceptable behavior” and by “community members from all ethnic, cultural, religious,

socioeconomic, and other groups.” While rhetorically sharing the assumption that there are core, invariant, universal values comprising six character traits, one proposal also said that “Students, staff, and family/community members model core values—all three are equally responsible for exhibiting character and should feel ownership for core values (i.e., not superimposed by any one group).” This state’s notion of a core value, then, appears to straddle the fence: On the one hand, the authors state agreement with the invariant Six Pillars of Character that transcend culture, nationality, race, gender, creed, and ethnicity written into the OERI RFP. On the other hand, they endorse the idea that the values are core to the community, rather than to humankind, and are determined through a bottom-up process of discussion and consensus.

The Protestant Work Ethic. The idea of productivity ran throughout the proposals we reviewed, a key facet of the discourse of the Protestant work ethic. One proposal asserted that “From civic education to teen pregnancy reduction, there is a common belief of what we as a society want our children to know and be able to do. It is common ground that defines citizens as productive, responsible, caring, and contributing individuals.” One sees a hint of the discourse of youth depravity in this statement—those who are productive, and so forth, will presumably be too busy or less inclined to engage in premarital sex. We did not include the discourse of youth depravity within the discourses of Upper Midwestern states because adults were identified as being prone to the same temptations and behaviors as youth and were provided with counseling services to address problems in their own lives. The inclusion of adults as potentially in need of character improvement suggests a broader attention to health issues, recognizing that violence and other at-risk behaviors are exhibited by young and old alike. While adults are encouraged to model positive character, they are not offered as the sole, authoritative model for young people to emulate.

The proposals assert that instilling a work ethic in young people will contribute to a happier workforce:

Children who grow up to be productive and contributing citizens are much more than academically successful. The world of work requires individuals who are capable of managing their own health and well-being, and who have the skills necessary for problem-solving, self-direction, self-motivation, self-reflection, and life-long learning.

The notion of productivity revealed here is tied to other discourses found in these proposals: academic achievement (a necessary but not sufficient condition for productive citizens), citizenship as a consequence of the contributions that accrue from a sound work ethic, and student agency resulting from the competence achieved through hard work. Keeping individual noses to the grindstone will ennoble both the person who adopts productive work habits and the greater community who will benefit from each person's contributions to society.

Family First. The discourse of family first provided another contradiction within the proposals from the Upper Midwest, coming in conflict with the discourse of community. One proposal claimed that "Schools are places where these qualities [of character], ideally first taught in the home, can and should be promoted with the support and involvement of the family and community." These states, while recognizing the role of the family, elaborated their proposals to suggest that it takes a village to raise a child. This same state claims elsewhere, for instance, that the school should "Be a resource to families in establishing home environments to support children as students and citizens."

We see ambivalence in their claim that the home is the first teacher of morality. The home is viewed as likely to be inadequate to the task of raising good students and citizens; the school and community are thus invested with

the paternalistic role of helping families with this complex task. One proposal claimed that "Forty-eight percent of Americans believe that people need support from their local communities, beyond their immediate families, to help raise their children. Community efforts to strengthen parental involvement can have far-reaching benefits. This underscores the importance of educators seeking ways to continually engage the community." So, while the family is the first teacher of character, it is part of an extended community that participates in the raising of children.

This vision is articulated in this proposal author's belief that a character education initiative should address societal issues:

The school is the one institution other than the family that has consistent contact with all children. However, some children are challenged by life issues such as violence, AIDS, teen pregnancy, and AOD [Alcohol and Other Drugs]. Schools, in partnership with families and communities, must help children develop the knowledge, attitudes, and skills they need to make responsible decisions about these behaviors. Children who are dealing with such challenges are simply too preoccupied or distracted to do their best in school.

The other state made a similar declaration:

The development of positive character traits in young people is a responsibility of the family as first and most important teachers, the schools as a safe and positive place for young people to grow to their utmost potential, and the community where young people are given opportunities to see positive character traits modeled by the adults, and meaningful opportunities to participate in the life of the community.

The states from the Upper Midwest, consistent with their communitarian approach, see the family as the most important among their youth's moral teachers, but one among many resources that both young people and their families may rely on for support and guidance. Absent from this conflict is the southern states' implication of youth depravity in the moral

mix. In general, young people in the proposals from the Upper Midwest are members of a broader community of flawed but earnest citizens who share responsibility for the outcome of all children raised within its social borders. While the family is the first teacher of morals, the community also shares responsibility for children's collective upbringing. The line between parental prerogative and community intervention, however, remains unclear as articulated in these proposals. Like the proposals from the Deep South, the proposals from the Upper Midwest are ambivalent on the respective roles of families and communities in raising children. The southern proposals appear to be clearer on when the state should intervene with a character curriculum: when "their" homes are not providing the moral guidance that "ours" do. The upper midwestern proposals provide no such distinction, making it unclear when a family cedes its moral authority to the state.

Class-based Morality. The discourse of class-based morality was subtle in the proposals from the Upper Midwest yet present nonetheless. Among the class distinctions we inferred from their documents was their reliance on reports on discipline problems, participation in extracurricular activities, and parental and community involvement as assessment measures for the success of the character intervention. As Eckert (1989) argues, students from "burnout" culture tend to view the school as tangential to their financial, emotional, and social needs and tend to resist its efforts to socialize them into middle class norms. They are more likely to engage in behaviors (e.g., smoking) that may result in disciplinary measures, less likely to participate in extracurricular activities, and less likely to have parents who view school as a place that welcomes their involvement. As a result, students from such families and backgrounds are more likely to be viewed as deficient in character according to these measures.

Minorities and limited English proficiency populations were also targeted for some

aspects of the character education initiatives, again suggesting that those from such backgrounds would perform better in school if their character were improved. This discourse was tempered by other aspects of the programs, which clearly identified adults from all segments of the population as both worthy participants in the initiative and potentially at risk themselves to the range of vulnerabilities faced by young people. The presence of the discourse of class-based morality, then, provided another internal contradiction, particularly relative to the discourse of community. On the one hand, young people from working class and racial or linguistic minorities are less likely to participate in school activities and so are more likely to be measured as lacking character in the program assessment. On the other, the community is a place of social justice and equality for all citizens and a nurturing extended family that offers caring relationships to all within its range.

Logical Positivism. The discourse of logical positivism was a minor stream in the proposals from the Upper Midwest, primarily in the area of assessment. One state used numerical trends on grades, discipline problems, and so forth to measure the effects of the programs; as we have noted, these measures likely reinforced impressions that those most in need of character education are from socially marginalized populations. This discourse was offset by the abundance of other data sources such as action research teams within schools. We see the possibility of the discourse of grantsmanship in the employment of statistical indexes of change, given the federal government's beliefs about the superior validity of quantitative, preferably experimental research in such arenas as reading research (Allington, 2002).

Discourses Particular to the Upper Midwest

The discourses that we found present in the proposals from the Upper Midwest but not the

Deep South suggested a different set of beliefs about character education. Rather than the social hierarchies presumed in the Deep South, these states formulated a communitarian notion of character that we found congenial to the socialistic and democratic foundations of the German and Scandinavian cultures that formed the values of white immigrants to this region.

Citizenship. One proposal from the Upper Midwest included the belief that “Like Thomas Jefferson, John Dewey’s main concern was our democratic way of life, and like Jefferson, he also understood the central role that public education must play if the republic is to remain vital, dynamic, and healthy.” The ideas of John Dewey appeared on several occasions in the proposals from the Upper Midwest, though never in those from the Deep South. Dewey’s progressivism is regarded as odious in the authoritarian conception of character education found in the Deep South yet compatible with the communitarian approach embodied in the proposals from the Upper Midwest. Dewey’s precept that “What the best and wisest parent wants for his or her child, that must be what the whole community wants for all its children. Any other ideal for our schools is narrow and unloving, and acted upon, it destroys our democracy,” quoted in one proposal, embodies the belief that character and character education are the domain of the community. (We should note that Dewey is misquoted here; he actually said, “What the best and wisest parent wants for his own child, that must the community want for all its children. Any other ideal for our schools is narrow and unlovely; acted upon, it destroys our democracy” [1900, p. 3]).

The notion of citizenship is not restricted to those in school, but projects a more equitable society when today’s youngsters become tomorrow’s role models. One proposal stated that

The call to citizenship is not solely identifying what we don’t want young people to

do but clearly understanding the kind of people we would like them to become. It is a mission of youth development that engages them in meeting their basic personal and social needs to be safe, feel cared for, be valued, be useful, and be spiritually grounded. Through positive experiences, youth build assets and competencies that allow them to function and contribute in their daily lives.... Time will pass, and youth will grow into adults regardless of the support they receive. The question is what kind of adults they will become. Positive youth development occurs when adults deliberately create conditions and opportunities for youth to become caring, contributing, productive, and responsible citizens.

This emphasis on community extends the program’s goals to all stakeholders; one state argued that schools should “support school employees who may be dealing with similar issues in their own lives through an Employee Assistance Program.”

Again, the discourse of citizenship was associated with other discourses: student agency (youth build assets and competencies), relationships (youth become caring and contributing), and Protestant work ethic (youth become productive). All of these discourses contribute to an overall emphasis on the communitarian approach to character education found in the states from the Upper Midwest that at times was contradicted by such discourses as the class-based society.

Community. Operating on a more local social level than the discourse of citizenship, the discourse of community stresses the need for citizens to contribute to the climate that makes up life in their immediate social and geographical range of relationships. Said one proposal, “formal curriculum is not the end but the means to a larger, more important end. Education must seek to help students integrate the knowledge they gain into a coherent vision; help students envision an adult life where they are full, contributing members of a community and society; and help students acquire values and skills that provide leadership and service.” Furthermore, “the overrid-

ing vision of a caring community is matched with the philosophy of enhancing student engagement and climate/culture issues in order to increase academic achievement.”

The discourse of community included attention to issues of a positive school climate, including safety, mutual care, orderliness, virtue, partnerships, and local control. One proposal referred to the need for family and community involvement in the character education effort:

The contributions of all who make up the school community are honored and celebrated. Parents, caregivers, and community members have a variety of opportunities to make meaningful contributions to school programming and student citizenship development.

The discourse of community regards values as local and situated. This postulation is different from the authoritarian, universalist premises held by the southern states and institutionalized in the OERI RFP, again creating conflicts between the upper midwestern states’ simultaneous needs to write a fundable grant and produce a coherent notion of character. The relativism of the upper midwestern proposal is suggested through one state superintendent of education’s recommendation to “Use the [citizenship] tool kit as a resource to help you shape your own efforts. There is no one prescription that fits all communities, but we can all learn from each other, starting in our own communities.” One state solicited input from diverse constituents through “community forums to develop a list of character traits for their community.”

Presumably this bottom-up approach would lead to the identification of traits representing the interests and values of the community’s diverse constituents, rather than universal traits that transcend such cultural variation. The issue of moral relativity is antithetical to the approach taken by the states from the Deep South and their faith in authoritarian social hierarchies. Yet relativity is acknowledged as inevitable in the sort of bottom-up approach

found in the Upper Midwest. One state argued that their results and conclusions

would be very difficult to replicate in schools outside the pilot project because of the lack of a strong value and belief system around teaching and learning. This is a very simple statement and yet the complexities of implementation boggle the mind. Therefore, it is our intent in this part of the dissemination-clearinghouse proposal to incorporate training that looks at values and beliefs followed by incorporation of unit plans that are driven by measurable student outcomes.

This state explicitly distances itself from the claims of replicability that were made by the southern states. Rather, the authors view each community as unique and likely to identify different problems and solutions in its development of a character curriculum. This statement also suggests a different notion of dissemination than that found in the southern profile. In the Deep South dissemination fit with the discourse of the authoritarian society in which powerful people in decision-making positions hand down an effective, replicable way to teach character. In the Upper Midwest what is disseminated is the idea that each school has unique values and beliefs that make replication of any particular program unlikely.

As is common throughout these proposals, each discourse is implicated in others to produce a generally unified, though inevitably contradictory conception of character education. One state from the Upper Midwest, for instance, argued that

This country is based on some basic beliefs of democracy [*citizenship*] that include a society where its members care about one another [*relationships*], contribute to the common good [*community*], and participate in sustaining a democratic way of life [*citizenship*]. To be productive citizens in America [*Protestant work ethic*], students need to recognize individual differences [*diversity*]; acknowledge common bonds [*relationships*]; and demonstrate skills related to diversity, inclusiveness, and fairness [*diversity*].

This ideology produced paradoxical proposals that argued for a bottom-up, communitarian conception of character while also asserting contradictory claims about moral absolutism and class-based morality.

Diversity. In the discourse of diversity, a community claims a dedication to including as many of its various constituents as possible in the definition of character and formulation of a character curriculum. Explicit attention to historically marginalized groups was provided in the proposals, as in the following:

Diversity exists in various forms including but not limited to race/ethnicity, culture, talent, ability and disability, sex/gender, sexual orientations, age, religion, language, socioeconomic status, and learning styles. Inclusiveness involves providing social and economic access to everyone, understanding and appreciating all individuals and groups, learning about the contributions of diverse cultures and times, and developing skills that foster communication. Fairness requires actively challenging prejudice, stereotyping, bias, hatred, and discrimination to ensure a social climate free of favoritism or bias and impartiality and equity to all parties.

These states thus hoped to “Create school environments that reflect and honor the cultural traditions of all people” and “develop a variety of teaching strategies to meet the diverse needs of students” so that

Students will see and experience their own and others’ cultures, contributions, and traditions; Staff will support diverse students and families, employ culturally relevant and fair instructional practices; Families and community will honor the cultural traditions and contributions of all groups.

Among the goals of including diverse groups in the character initiative is to ensure social equality:

We believe the very nature of this Character Education Pilot Project addresses the

precursors of discrimination. Research in the field of prejudice has found that children learn prejudice in two basic ways: by adopting the prejudices of their parents, and by absorbing the lessons of the larger cultural environment when that environment fosters suspicion, fear, and hatred of specific groups of people (Allport, 1982). This proposal concentrates on creating a school/community climate that discourages biased acts of any kind and fosters a valuing of diversity that character education qualities exemplify. We believe the results of this Character Education Learning Community Model will show the impact of this new social norm.

We see a contrast between the upper mid-western states’ approach to diversity and the southern states’ embracing of middle class norms and hieratic positioning of “we”—the upper and middle classes who control the rhetoric and resources of character education—and “they,” the social groups on the margins of that culture whose behavior is the target of a character intervention. We also see the Upper Midwest’s embrace of the broadest possible definition of diversity as embodying the sort of relativism rejected by the states from the Deep South.

Relationships. The discourse of relationships included attention to the quality of long-term interactions among community members, particularly relationships between students and adults. Typical of this discourse is the following statement from the rationale one proposal provided for seeking to develop positive relationships in the schools:

A collegial relationship among staff and a positive relationship between staff and students contribute to a nurturing, safe, and productive environment. These relationships are critical to helping children overcome difficulty, recognize their talents, and feel individually and collectively valued. School staff understand that they play a critical role in helping students grow and develop as individuals in order to be academically successful.

By developing positive relationships across stakeholders in the school, students will, according to the proposals, internalize the Protestant work ethic and thereby experience academic achievement.

One proposal made an explicit link to Noddings's (1992) notion of the caring community in which the emphasis is

not on the deficit character qualities we see in kids but on the need to develop a caring environment that values all people including children and youth.... This campaign in the pilot project helped facilitate the discussion in town meetings not on the deficit character qualities we see in kids but on the need to develop a caring environment that values all people including children and youth.

Here the proposal rejected the discourse of youth depravity, taking instead an affirmative view of young people perhaps central to a relational approach to character education.

Attention to affect was an explicit part of one state's approach. The proposal authors argue that

The W. T. Grant Consortium on the School-Based Promotion of Social Competence designed programs to increase proactive factors such as bonding to school, resisting antisocial influences, and forming positive social relationships. This research also found that programs designed to have an impact on students' behavior must recognize that change occurs over time, and that learning prosocial skills not only helps young people with their interpersonal relationships but also with their attitudes towards school.... Howard Gardner (Harvard, 1990) has made a strong link between the cognitive and affective domains, one that is crucial to inform [the state's] pilot project. The works of Goldeman (emotional intelligence) and Pat Wolfe (brain research) look at how the affective domain is critical to increasing student achievement.... This engagement of all of the school/community stakeholders is a long-term process that calls for the building of relationships (Peck, 1990).

The discourse of relationships—undoubtedly the sort of rhetoric that Ryan (2003) would characterize as “the soft language of therapy” (p. 4)—was tied to the discourse of community, with an emphasis on the “engagement of all of the school/community stakeholders [in] a long-term process that calls for the building of relationships.” These relationships include healthy and positive, cultivated and sustained affiliations among all stakeholders in the school system:

Students feel personally known and cared for by at least one adult in the school. Students and community members are viewed as resources for supporting one another. A collegial relationship among staff and a positive relationship between staff and students contribute to a nurturing, safe, and productive environment. These relationships are critical to helping children overcome difficulty, recognize their talents, and feel individually and collectively valued.

This emphasis on relationships runs counter to the discourse of the authoritarian society, which places students in subservient positions relative to adults. A relational approach to character education instead relies on mutual understanding and personal mentorship so that students are apprenticed into a caring community's value on joint activity and mutual assistance. Above all, as one proposal stated, this approach “comes from a perspective of being *with* kids, not doing *to* kids” (emphasis in original). This approach assumes that young people earnestly desire adult company and adoption of their values, a belief eschewed in the more adversarial approach implied by the proposals from the southern states. Undoubtedly, the upper midwestern perspective on children and adolescents is characterized by a degree, perhaps a large degree, of romanticism of the sort disdained by Kevin Ryan, Thomas Lickona, and others who profoundly influenced the tenets of the Aspen Declaration and are explicitly consulted for their character education services by the southern states whose proposals we have analyzed.

Student Agency

The American education system is currently being challenged from within and without to examine its policies and practices and to implement strategies that will result in students who are prepared to take an active and positive role in a life-long learning process, which has at its core, demonstration of positive character.

This statement, taken from one of the proposals from the Upper Midwest, illustrates the discourse of student agency. This discourse is implicated in the various ways that the proposal authors argue for empowering young people with tools for navigating the pitfalls of childhood, adolescence, and adulthood. On the whole this emphasis is part of a greater effort to view young people in a positive way:

Focusing on assets development rather than a deficits model for conceptualizing what young people need, and focusing on specific strategies to promote resiliency in youth through provision of a caring adult consistently in their lives, meaningful opportunities to participate, skills for academic, social and emotional success, and high expectations will sustain positive character development over time.

This statement suggests some of the conflicts seemingly inherent to the project of articulating and operationalizing a conception of character. The discourse of family first exhibited elsewhere in this proposal is compromised by the *in loco parentis* role of the school in providing surrogate parents in the form of caring adults.

The proposals specifically identified two aspects of student agency that a character curriculum could foster, *engagement* and *resiliency*. The notion of engagement was evident in proposals' efforts to create an affiliation among youngsters with school and its activities. This initiative was designed to make school more relevant for young people and their interests and to promote active learning about citizenship and democracy. Student surveys, argue the authors of one proposal, indicate that students do not feel ownership, pride,

or respect for school or adults. It is imperative, then, to make a commitment to taking students' views and experiences seriously:

Schools use many strategies and approaches to make learning relevant for students. Classrooms are interactive places that often take learning beyond the school-room door. Engaging students' minds keeps them connected to school and makes them responsible for their own learning. Students who are connected to school have the greatest opportunities for becoming caring, contributing, productive, and responsible citizens. Involve students beyond the classroom in meaningful participation in other activities such as school plays, clubs, sports, music, etc. Create an environment in which students feel free to express their thoughts and feelings or to make mistakes without ridicule; develop thoughtful challenging tasks and learning experiences. Students, staff, and family/community share equal responsibility for meeting citizenship goals.

This belief in the value of engagement with school is the sort of progressive thinking that has drawn the derision of critics of the Deweyan tradition (e.g., Sykes, 1992). Again, a degree of romanticism runs throughout the conception of young people in the proposals from the Upper Midwest; children and adolescents are noble and sincere about learning and growing into contributing members of a peaceable community. The states from the Upper Midwest implore educators to change the school climate to make education a more engaging experience and to increase students' respect for adults. In contrast, the southern states assume that respect for adults is a responsibility of each individual child to adopt as part of character development; an absence of such respect indicates a lack of character.

Resiliency is described in the documents as follows:

Research says that kids can develop incredible abilities to bounce back (be resilient) if four things are consistently present in their lives: (1) meaningful opportunities to participate in something adults value; (2) a caring adult consistently [available]

through their growing up years; (3) skills in interpersonal relationships and critical thinking; and (4) high expectations for their behavior and performance. There are ways to involve community service organizations, churches, community service projects, city councils, clubs, and other entities to promote resiliency.

Student agency is thus tied to other discourses, particularly that of relationships but also of academic achievements and community. The goal of developing student agency appears to run counter to the southern states' assumptions about the authoritarian society. One proposal from the Upper Midwest, for instance, identified the principle that they should "Create an environment in which students feel free to express their thoughts and feelings or to make mistakes without ridicule." Our first observation is that this statement reveals the sort of communitarian approach advocated throughout these proposals: The emphasis is on changing the environment, not the individual child in need of character improvement.

Second, freedom of expression is not always compatible with authoritarian social structures. We assume that this freedom extends to the privilege of criticizing the school administration, an act that might be viewed as a sign of low character in the southern states. We see the possibility that in the southern states, free expression might be repressed because respect for adults is a premium virtue. The discourse of student agency, in contrast, would appear to empower students to speak up as a way to make the school a more congenial environment to all who make up its community. Whether the adults in the upper midwestern schools indeed appreciate students' agency to speak their minds is not substantiated in the proposals.

Local Control

Both states from the Upper Midwest emphasized the local nature of decision making. One state included "Site-Managed

Schools" as among the features of their program, arguing that

Site management attempts to increase individual autonomy of stakeholders through shared information and expanded involvement in decision making.... The neighborhood school may be the best place to reconcile competing claims with local conditions and preferences. "One shoe does not fit all," so what may work in one building in a district may not be the perfect fit for another building in the district ... site management attempts to strike a balance between school autonomy and central office, or district, goals and initiatives.... The site-managed school, by its nature, involves all stakeholders in decision-making.

This view is quite different from the authoritarian conception of school management implied in the southern states' proposals, in which decisions are centralized and results replicated in other districts. It also embraces a certain degree of relativism, suggesting that what works for one group and setting might not for another.

In a telephone conversation with an official from one upper midwestern state, she said that her state's history of grassroots politics would make it nearly impossible to centralize decision making in any statewide effort, including a character education initiative. This observation fits well with the cultural context we provided at the beginning of this chapter, in which the historical practices of these states have established bottom-up decision making in local arenas that invite a broad range of voices, particularly those who do not control economic resources. This practice is evidenced in such institutions as the Iowa political caucuses for identifying presidential candidates, in which candidates have an opportunity to visit many of Iowa's small towns, discuss important issues face-to-face with ordinary citizens, and develop their platforms based on these conversations. This practice suggests a different approach to decision making, one based on local control, than that found in the historically

authoritarian social structure of the Deep South.

Reproduction of the Social Division of Labor. This discourse was concerned with preparing young people for the workplace, particularly those presumed not to be bound for higher education. Character education is “situated within a global economy and workplace transformation that demands a new set of knowledges, skills, and attributes, some of which have not yet been discovered or defined,” according to one proposal. The character education proposals from the Upper Midwest stressed the need to prepare students for this emerging economy and the jobs it provides. One proposal termed this effort “Life-work education ... designed to work with students in planning for personal, post-high school goals” through “the linking of the Perkins and School-to-Work requirements of workplace readiness skills with the character education qualities.”

To assist with this transformation, one proposal listed U.S. Department of Labor statistics regarding the characteristics that employers look for in teens:

- Learning-to-learn skills;
- Listening and communication;
- Adaptability: creative thinking and problem solving, especially in response to barriers/obstacles;
- Personal management: self-esteem, goal-setting/self-motivation, personal career development/goals, pride in work accomplished;
- Group effectiveness: interpersonal skills, negotiation, teamwork; and
- Organizational effectiveness and leadership; making a contribution.

Presumably, this attention to employee characteristics contributes to a more effective character curriculum. Benjamin Franklin, author of many maxims that contributed to the development of the U.S. character, believed that engagement in work would elevate the

nation’s moral quality: “The almost general mediocrity of fortune that prevails in America, obliging its people to follow some business for subsistence, those vices that arise usually from idleness are in a great measure prevented. Industry and constant employment are great preservatives of morals and virtue” (quoted in Isaacson, 2003, p. 424). We see productive work as fitting the discourse of the Protestant work ethic, to be instilled in young people so that they may advance through the employment ranks regardless of where they begin on the salary scale. And, given that these statistics refer to teen employment, we assume that this initiative will serve students who enter the workforce as teens rather than going on to tertiary education. As such this discourse is palpably at odds with the discourses of citizenship and community that are so central to the upper midwestern conception of character education.

Summary

The states from the Upper Midwest conceive of character education generally as a community-based, relational, constructive process, driven by Jeffersonian and Deweyan conceptions of citizenship and democracy. This broad view is undermined by the discourses of class-based morality and the reproduction of the social division of labor, which target low-socioeconomic status youth for both character improvement and placement in blue collar jobs and therefore contradict the general value on diversity and equity. Furthermore, the effort to secure OERI funding required compromising the general emphasis on local control and the inclusion of diverse voices with the RFP’s requirement to endorse the notion of core universal values.

DISCUSSION

In this study we have identified the two clearest expositions of philosophy found in OERI-funded proposals and provided profiles of these distinct conceptions of character and

character education. The other states whose materials we analyzed provided more hybrid conceptions of character and character education. Our goal has not been to report the frequency of various positions but to establish that these perspectives exist, to outline each in detail, and to trace, as evidence permits, their development in relation to the OERI RFP and its own history, and to the dominant regional cultures that provide the context in which character education is conceived and put into practice.

While we are not able to completely set aside our own beliefs, biases, and values, we should reiterate that our goal has not been to criticize one region or conception at the expense of the other, but to contrast the discourse of character education as we find it emerging from distinct regional cultures and discourses. We should emphasize that the discourses themselves are not exclusive to the regions, but rather congenial to the ideologies of the dominant cultures of these regions and therefore familiar, sensible, accessible, and amenable to the authors of the character education proposals we have reviewed.

We also do not intend to represent these two views as a binary. We recall the old adage: There are two types of people in the world, those who think that there are two types of people in the world, and those who don't. We fall in the second category because we see binaries as overly simplistic, reductive, and unproductive except heuristically to establish points on a continuum. We hope that our own effort to contrast the conceptions of character education that we found in the Deep South and Upper Midwest to be less of a binary and more of a distinction between two positions, with many hybrids available in between. Indeed, our reading located one U.S. conception of character that represented a radically different ideology, that being Jacobs and Jacobs-Spencer's (2001) Native American perspective. They view character as involving "intimate relationships of living things" (p. vii) so that humans may live in harmony with nature; they further stress the importance of the spiritual,

by which they mean "a sacred awareness that we are all related and that all things in the seen and unseen universe are interconnected. This, of course, includes our vital relationships and interdependence on the earth and its creatures" (p. ix). Their exposition of this perspective suggests that there is at least a trinary, and likely much more as the notion of character is explored through broad and inclusive studies of cultures.

Undoubtedly, such values as the Protestant work ethic are critical to the successful operation of an industrialized society. We imagine that most people who know us would say that we've internalized this ethic pretty well ourselves. The goals of industrialized societies are best achieved when people are punctual, hard working, and so on. Such values might not contribute so well, however, to a society in which the fluid time conception and less materialistic values inherent to a Native American perspective obtain, given this culture's more cyclical understanding of time and greater orientation to being in balance with nature than to competing with other people for goods. Our study has outlined these different cultural constructs and attempted to analyze how they are products of particular cultural activity. Rather than transcending cultures, then, as institutionalized in the OERI RFP, conceptions of good character as ideological and a function of particular cultural goals, values, and practices.

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