

#### Culture, Policy, and Money in Character Education

Smagorinsky, Peter & Taxel, Joel. (2005). *The Discourse of Character Education: Culture Wars in the Classroom*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 416 pages, \$99.95 (hardcover), ISBN 0-8058-5126-7.

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Even while schools face mounting pressures to pack more "academic content" into their curricula and improve standardized test scores, support and funding for character education curricula remain strong. Because "character" means different things to different people, however, character education is inevitably a fiercely contested realm—not only for its educational import, but also in its proxy role in staking ground in broader cultural wars.

*The Discourse of Character Education: Culture Wars in the Classroom* explores the topic both from a curricular perspective as well as in terms of the wider cultural implications. Theoretical critiques of modern character education are not uncommon in educational scholarship (e.g., Purpel (1989); Green (1999); Simon (2001)), and while Smagorinsky and Taxel rehearse these arguments, they extend their analysis in additional, worthwhile directions, primarily through the policy lens of educational grantwriting. This book combines a helpful overview of character education, past and present, with a focused look at how federal funding opportunities have shaped the discourse, curriculum, and assessment of character education in the United States.

Smagorinsky and Taxel focus their analysis on proposals submitted to the U.S. Office of Educational Research and Improvement (OERI) for character education funding. In their review of available materials, the authors encounter conceptions of character spanning a continuum ranging from orthodox/conservative to progressive/liberal. They identify proposals from the Deep South as generally representing the orthodox perspective on character education, while proposals from the Upper Midwest tend toward the progressive end of the spectrum. Orthodox conceptions of character education emphasize youth

depravity, authoritarian transmission of values, "the good old days," and individual responsibility. Progressive orientations focus on civic responsibility, the values of community and diversity, and the importance of student voice and local control.

As the authors acknowledge, the intent of their project is not to draw comprehensive conclusions about how the Deep South conceives of character and character education versus the Upper Midwest (the limited sample size makes this impossible anyway); instead, their analysis provides compelling illustrations of how Americans—influenced in part by culture and region—understand character differently and thus advocate widely varying visions of character education.

Smagorinsky and Taxel construct a threefold analysis, exploring questions of discourse (e.g., implicit, unstated assumptions about character), curriculum (e.g., what does the program look like?), and assessment (e.g., how do they attempt to measure character growth?). This brief review cannot detail the full range of their project, but the following examples will provide a sense of their varied findings.

The discourse analysis of the character education funding proposals is thoughtful and detailed, while remaining free of jargon and minutiae. The authors remind us that these curricula are about more than character: "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" (p. 63). With this in mind, the authors pay careful attention to proposal language, such as the use of "we" as a way to claim a moral consensus (frequently linked to a class-based morality) and an implicit "them" referring to those who need to be inculcated into "our" moral community. With an eye to the Deep South proposals in particular, Smagorinsky and Taxel pointedly and repeatedly reject the "good old days" mindset in which proposals frame schools and societies today as besieged by youth depravity. They offer a range of reasoning and evidence to suggest that such a claim is far more perception than reality.

In contrasting the two regions' visions of effective character education, the authors point to the Deep South's emphasis on authoritarian indoctrination of moral precepts as opposed to the Upper Midwest's concern with communal generation of moral understanding and commitment. A related, foundational difference is the South's conception of character as essentially an individual matter, whereas the Midwest proposals were more inclined to consider the influence of social context and the need for social institutions to foster just environments in which good character is supported and can flourish.

*The Discourse of Character Education* also points out the commonalities across character education proposals, among those a strong emphasis on moral absoluteness, an embrace of the Protestant work ethic, and an undertone of class-based morality. Another highly significant

observation, the authors make regarding common proposal features stems from the CRT/RFP insistence on linking effective character education with academic achievement. Smagorinsky and Taval observe that this while link is frequently implied or even asserted by funding proposals, it is never demonstrated empirically by evaluation research (they also point out the nearly complete absence of compelling assessment data altogether in part because little consensus exists on what scholars in the field should be measuring).

Throughout their analysis, the authors take pains to emphasize that, despite their own progressive proclivities, they do not intend to champion the Upper Midwest approach or the expense of the Deep South versions of character education, but rather simply to highlight the differences. They succeed in part, but some frustration of the Deep South proposals may deserve more charitable interpretations. For instance, Smagorinsky and Taval rightly emphasize the ways in which normative assumptions about good character may unfairly exclude others. But questions such as "Is there ever a role for imitation of habit and tradition, and deference to authority?" or "Are there ways in which civility might prove important in fostering an atmosphere in which tough issues can be discussed?" might uncover facets of orthodox character education worth preserving in some form. Answers to these questions will undoubtedly vary according to context—and especially the age/developmental level of students—but merit further consideration.

In addition, the authors may also be too quick to label the tension between communitarian conceptions of character and moral absolutism as an inherent contradiction. They contend that grant writers were impelled by OEIR proposal requirements to emphasize moral absolutism, even when the applicants' own character education curricula defined morality in more local terms. From a philosophical perspective, however, room exists for both ethical pluralists and ethical moralists within the same curricular framework. It may be possible to implement a form of character education that encourages local deliberation of morality sensitive to diverse perspectives while still allowing for the possibility of moral absolutes. While helping students wrestle with moral ambiguity is an essential facet of character education, it does not require a rejection of moral absolutes altogether. It almost certainly does demand, however, an interpretive humility demonstrated by a willingness to listen to others and sensitivity to nuance, recognizing the interpretive distance between oneself and whatever sources of (absolute) truth one endorses.

Regardless, these minor criticisms do not detract significantly from the overall value of the book and the range of information and insights it offers. While some readers may find the sidebar quotations about character scattered throughout the text to be distracting, the book as a whole is clearly written and offers a compelling look at how character education is framed and promoted at the policy level. For

readers unfamiliar with the terrain of character education, *The Discourse of Character Education* provides a clear summary bolstered by a helpful compilation of history and scholarly analysis from a variety of sources. For those conversant with the literature and research, this book offers a fresh and insightful subject of analysis, one that not only sheds light on the current state of character education but raises important questions about how the policy framework and discourse shape not only the eventual curricula but also influence the broader "culture wars" perpetually played out in our nation's schools.

#### References

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