

BOOK REVIEW

In the Name of Morality: Character Education and Political Control (Adolescent Cultures, School & Society, Vol.26) (2004). By T. Yu. New York: Peter Lang Publishing.

Victor Battistich

University of Missouri–St Louis

For those of us who are deeply engaged in the field of character development, Tianlong Yu's book will seem at first glance a superficial look at character education programs and an exaggerated comparison of the similarities between moral education in mainland China and the United States. Nevertheless, it merits a thoughtful read for at least two reasons. First, an outsider's perspective is always worth considering because it reveals to us how we appear to the rest of the world. Second, although his description of character education programs in the United States is overly simplistic, out of date, and obviously incorrect in some instances, there remains more than a grain of truth in his analysis and we would do well to seriously consider some of his arguments.

Yu begins by drawing parallels between moral education as practiced in mainland China and in the United States, and argues that

there is essentially a great deal of commonality in the goals and practices of the two approaches. As suggested in the book's title, he sees both as directed toward inculcating specific virtues in youth in order to preserve and strengthen the status quo: that is, as mechanisms of political control. In support of this argument, he points to the historical record (in both China and the United States) that shows that concern over "moral decay" and calls for schools to engage in character education increase during times of societal transition, and to the conservative, traditional, virtue-centered approaches to character education that are called for during such times, with their emphasis on assimilation, socialization and conformity to the existing social order. This may seem an inaccurate and unfair characterization (of the United States, at least), but Yu is correct that public support for character educa-

• **Victor Battistich**, University of Missouri–St Louis, Email: vicb@umsl.edu

Journal of Research in Character Education, 3(1), 2005, pp. 71–72
Copyright © 2005 Information Age Publishing, Inc.

ISSN 1543-1223
All rights of reproduction in any form reserved.

tion is at its highest during times of perceived social turmoil, and often is politically motivated.

The majority of the book involves a description and criticism of contemporary character education. Yu argues that the recent upswing in support for schools to address students' character and moral development is highly reminiscent of the situation in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, when concerns over large-scale immigration and rising crime rates led to the widespread use of character education programs in schools in order to socialize youth into mainstream society. Then as now, he argues, proponents of character education pointed to disturbingly high rates of "antisocial behavior" as signs of a serious decline in morality and civility, and politicians voiced the need for schools to redress this disturbing social trend by taking measures to improve the character of their students.

Drawing on the writings of Bill Bennett, William Kilpatrick, Tom Lickona, Kevin Ryan, and Ed Wynne, and using the Character Education Partnership's National Schools of Character as example, Yu describes contemporary approaches to character education as focusing on deficiencies in moral character as the primary cause of problem behavior among the young, as emphasizing moral exhortation and indoctrination in "virtues of the month," and as using extrinsic incentives to shape desirable behavior (i.e., moral "training"). He contends that the values promoted by these programs are decidedly conservative and largely reflect the Protestant work ethic, and that the claim of their "universality" serves to marginalize diversity and socialize youth into the dominant culture.

In the end, Yu constructs a "straw man" and proceeds to tear it apart. His description of character education is a caricature, and he pays

only scant attention to the work of Kohlberg and other constructivist, progressive approaches to moral and character development. To his credit, he acknowledges that most character educators are sincerely concerned with fostering the development of the whole child, and rightly view ethical and moral development as central to the mission of schools. However, he is fundamentally accurate in asserting that the field of character education is still largely focused on developing characteristics of individual children, much in the same way that teachers develop students' reading or mathematical skills. The influences of social contexts on the development of children and youth have received too little attention in approaches to character education. Even among programs that recognize the critical importance of the social structures and interpersonal relations of the school to students' character development, attention has been focused on establishing a social context that supports the development of attitudes, values, and skills that are required for adaptation to the dominant culture. The need for character education that fosters a true valuing of social diversity and alternative world views, and develops in students the inclinations and capacities to engage in social criticism and social change has been largely ignored.

Yu also calls attention to the dangers posed to character education by the current emphases on academic standards and accountability through high-stakes testing. He points out that improvements in test scores have been increasingly touted by character educators as an important outcome of their programs, which only reinforces the obsession with academics and testing. For these and other cautionary notes, as well as for prompting us to critically examine our practices in light of the intended goals of our efforts at character education, Yu's book is worth reading.