

BOOK REVIEW

The Discourse of Character Education: Culture Wars in the Classroom (2005). P. Smagorinsky & J. Taxel. Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum.

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PLAYING THE CULTURE CARD

Peter Smagorinsky and Joel Taxel present a complex, often engaging, explication of contemporary character education. Conceptions of character education reflect, among other things, powerful ideological positions. These ideological positions reveal polarizing moral stances held deeply in our society. The authors attempt to elaborate on these conceptions and claim they are powerfully influenced by relatively distinct regional cultures.

In this review I will briefly describe what I see as the major points of the authors. There is much in this book which, because of space, I will not attempt to summarize. Later I will offer some critical comments on the work.

The Discourse of Character Education: Culture Wars in the Classroom is set out in five parts with a total of 19 chapters. In Part I they describe the method of their study; sum-

marize the history of character education in America; highlight the debate over character education; and establish the theory behind their study. In short, they examine the Office of Educational Research and Improvement's (OERI) request for proposals from states to fund character education and some of the proposals themselves. From these data they "identify two regions that provide consistent conceptions of character and character education that sit on opposite ends of a philosophical continuum, and describe them in detail" (pp. 7-8).

The two presumably culturally distinct regions are identified as the Deep South and the Upper Midwest. They examine character education proposals from these regions. Their mode of analysis of these proposals and related documents is an application of the study of discourse. In part they claim the examination of discourse allows them to identify political and

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other ideologies that are embedded in the language of the proposals.

In Part II, they describe discourses shared by both regions, discourses unique to each region, and discourses involved in the OERI materials. They state the shared discourses focus on promoting academic achievement, assert moral absolutism, praise the Protestant work ethic, present an idyllic vision of family life, construe lower classes as vulgar and in need of proper values, and embrace logical positivism as the vision from which evaluations are properly derived.

Among the features of the Deep South character education language are: an emphasis on youth depravity, the need for an authoritarian society which holds the appropriate values, and the idea that society can be best improved by changing the values and behavior of persons. Among the features of the Upper Midwest discourse, presumed distinct from the other region are: the goal of citizenship education, the emphasis on community as a source of values, a recognition and respect for pluralism and the need to teach youth how to think critically about value issues.

Discourse analysis was also applied to the language of the OERI request for proposals on character education and the congressional discussions preceding the authorization of funding. The dominant conception of character education in these discussions was that coming from the Aspen conference of 1992 sponsored by the Josephson Institute. The participants at this conference identified six pillars of character—respect, responsibility, trustworthiness, justice and fairness, caring, and civic virtue (citizenship). These pillars, or values, were claimed to be invariant across all cultures, religions, and classes. They, along with student achievement, provided the dominant conception of character education in the OERI materials and in congressional discussions.

In Part III, the authors describe what they see as the Deep South's dominant conception of character education. This conception features didactic, individualistic, and authoritarian approaches:

We use the term *didactic* for this approach because of its hortatory effort to instruct young people in proper morals. Moral adults are viewed as the guardians of a set of universal ethical values and standards. They have an obligation to impress these values upon a generation of youngsters who are immersed in an increasingly coarse and corrupt culture. (p. 147)

In addition they assert the Deep South conception of character construes the United States as founded by leaders of high morality and helped create a virtuous nation. Character education requires hard work by individuals and those who instruct them to reach for superior moral standards and high academic achievement.

This presumably distinct conception of character education represents the culture of the Deep South. Culture is seen as a powerful causal influence on how character education is theorized and practiced. Although the authors do not claim culture is the only influence, clearly they see it as pervasive.

Among the key features of the culture of the Deep South are an emphasis on good manners, a history of racism, widespread fundamentalist Protestant religion, and widespread poverty. These cultural features are reflected in character education which emphasizes civility, moral absolutism, and the need to work hard.

Part IV parallels Part III but sets out the Upper Midwestern features of character education. Although the authors say the two regions have some common discourses, the Upper Midwest is believed distinct in its focus on community-based reflective approaches to character education which engage all in discussions of what is worthwhile:

A reflective, community-based approach to character education is designed to promote discussion among all participants about the process and effectiveness of the initiative. Furthermore, character is an issue taken up by constituents sharing an equal stake in the quality of community life. (p. 243)

This version of character education helps young people internalize values from a caring

community. These values help promote participation in the political life of the community and promote greater academic achievement.

The authors contend that this conception of character education largely derives from the distinct features of Upper Midwestern culture. Among the features of this culture are the strong Catholic influence brought by immigrants, a progressive political tradition intended to empower all citizens, a tradition of economic cooperatives, and an emphasis on the importance of education.

In Part V, Smagorinsky and Taxel present their conclusions from the study. They claim to have discovered two distinct conceptions of character and character education flowing from the two regions. Other regions, they say, have hybrid approaches as opposed to the two found in the Deep South and Upper Midwest. Their intent was “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, to the regional cultures that provide the context in which character education is conceived and put into practice, and to the broader streams of discourse in U.S. society, particularly those employed in the Culture Wars” (pp. 313-314).

A CRITICAL ASSESSMENT:

In my summary of *The Discourse of Character Education*, I have of necessity identified the major points made and omitted other arguments in the work. In the following section I will consider the soundness and persuasiveness of what I regard as the central arguments in their thesis.

One of the authors' central propositions is that the Deep South and the Upper Midwest have distinctly different conceptions of character and character education. I find it hard to tell how distinct these regional concepts are. There are two reasons for this: From time to time, the authors warn that they are not trying to claim the two regions are purely different from one

another. They acknowledge diversity in each region. Second, the authors, particularly in chapter six, establish a number of assumptions, values, and discourses shared by each region.

In spite of noting that the two regions are not culturally homogenous and that they share a variety of views about character education, the thrust of the argument is the contention that the distinctness of each region produces distinctly different view of character education. I don't know what to make of this.

I am not claiming that the authors are wrong on this count. It may be that there is as much variation within each region as there is between them. I have no evidence to confirm or deny such a conclusion. The authors presumably have evidence for their conclusion but they do not provide us with their primary data—the OERI proposals from the two regions. It would be helpful to see these proposals and to independently determine the soundness and clarity of their interpretations. The validity of their claim of distinctness is critical to the centerpiece of their exposition of cultural influence. After all, if the two regions do not have distinct conceptions of character education, what is the point of claiming that cultural distinctness contributes to such differences when they do not exist.

A second, but related, issue I have with the book is the notion of how culture helps determine the views of character education that are presumed dominant in each region. It is one thing to establish that the regions have distinctive views. It is another thing to show that these views flow from cultural differences between the regions.

I have no expertise on culture and its impact on our lives. We all live in a cultural context which no doubt influences us in a variety of ways. My guess, uneducated though it may be, is that cultural influence is part of a complex of multiple, interacting factors that generate our beliefs and practices. Teasing out these multiple influential/causal factors is an enormous undertaking. Again, I am not claiming the authors are wrong about their views of cultural influence. The book leaves me with the

impression, however, that cultural influences are the most powerful in determining the views of character education that exist in the regions studied. It is a bold claim and one which deserves continuing examination.

Although I have raised critical comments about certain central propositions in the book, there is much to commend. The authors have presented provocative arguments that deserve deeper discussion and analysis in the character education community and beyond. This is a

virtue of academic life to which they have contributed. For me, the major strength of their work is showing the political/ideological underpinnings of conceptions of character education. By and large, advocates of different conceptions of character education do not ground their advocacy in careful examination of effectiveness research. Strong moral views and assessments of social life lie beneath such advocacy. Smagorinsky and Taxel have shown us much of these underpinnings.