

The Promotion of Social Awareness

An Interview with Larsen Professor Robert Selman

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Larsen Professor Robert Selman is the founder of HGSE's Risk and Prevention Program. Selman has engaged in research and practice focused on helping children develop social competencies as a way to reduce risks to their health and promote their social relationships. In his current, practice-based research, he studies interpersonal and intergroup development and competence from preschool through high school. This current work, documented in his new book, *The Promotion of Social Awareness: Powerful Lessons from the Partnership of Developmental Theory and Classroom Practice*, is conducted in the context of literacy and language-arts curricula and in school-based programs designed to coordinate support services for students in the middle grades of the public schools.

Q: How do you recommend that teachers incorporate the development of "core social competencies" (such as the capacity to truly understand another person's perspective) directly into their academic curriculum?

A: This depends a bit on the grade level we're considering. For teachers in kindergarten and elementary grades, this should be a "cultural requirement" of the classroom. Indeed, I think it should be a strong cultural value of the entire school. One thing I explicitly recommend is that, when young children are blind to the effects of their own actions on others, teachers invest heavily in students to help them develop the skill of seeing how others are viewing them. This sounds easy to do, but it often is relatively hard to accomplish. For example, if a student is cursing in class, it's not unusual for teachers to respond, "we don't do that in our class," or "cut it out," or to assign a punitive measure. I'm not against consequences, but we need to make it our second nature to help students understand that the reason we don't condone behavior like that is that it is inconsiderate, embarrasses others, hurts feelings, and is unfair.

This is especially hard to do when students really annoy or anger us as teachers. One way to make these responses and reactions second nature is to use them more proactively. We recommend using "Classroom Community Meetings" on a regular basis to give students a chance to discuss how they are getting along and allow teachers to intervene in any social problems before they fester. While this is not a simple cure for one of the most challenging issues elementary grade teachers face—classroom management—it's a good type of prevention. The other major challenge teachers face is the promotion of literacy, and here core social competence can be directly aligned with this enormous pressure. In fact, it must be so if we are not going to leave children behind.

Q : Can you cite some of the benefits of integrating lessons of reading comprehension, literacy, and social competency into the same classroom activities?

A : Let's start by saying that even though this kind of integration has gone on for many years, it has seldom been based on scientific evidence. So we have much to do in the way of researching what I call an applied developmental science of education. This requires partnerships between practitioners and researchers. For our part, we have applied our own research on social development to help our practitioner partners design a curriculum at the elementary grades. This approach draws on high-quality, dynamic children's literature with strong writing and strong themes around social issues and social

relations to engage children in learning to read. For books like these, we have applied our research on social development to the design of a pedagogy that integrates oral language, reading comprehension, vocabulary, and writing skills with social skills such as conflict resolution and perspective taking skills.

Having said that, let's make a distinction between hard benefits and soft benefits. Hard benefits might be things like better scores on standardized reading tests, or less time out of class for students because of disciplinary problems. But researchers have not had the chance yet to do careful studies on the outcomes of integrating social awareness into literacy programs. One would need a well-designed longitudinal study that included assessments of how faithfully the program was implemented by the teachers as well as measures of the kinds of skills students acquire.

Soft benefits are no less important but often more difficult to measure in carefully controlled studies. The social benefits that teachers want to see are kids who treat each other more respectfully and who resolve conflicts in a balanced way that lasts over time in the classroom. On the literacy side, teachers want students who have a deeper understanding of the motivations that drive the characters about which they read, who write more engaged essays, who have a deeper awareness of the things that matter to them, and who just plain love to read.

Q: Do schoolteachers and administrators need to be able to recognize delays and/or shortcomings in social development as readily as they do for academics? If so, what training is necessary to make such abilities attainable?

A : The two major challenges in elementary schools today are getting all students to learn at the peak of their potential and managing the "behavior" of children who are disrupting the learning of themselves and others. This second concern has taken a back seat in the rhetoric of educational policy focused only on "instruction" as the final outcome, even in the minds of policy makers who are not down on the ground trying to meet these challenges.

But it has not escaped the concern of teachers and school administrators. In some schools, where the majority of children come to class carrying a bundle of adversities on their shoulders (poverty, experiences of violence, or lack of adequate health care), the risks for developing social problems are very real. Put another way, these students are at great risk for not achieving the necessary developmental milestones that will allow them to deal with the social issues that permeate their lives. The need to recognize these problems is both overwhelming and essential. The scientific knowledge base for good professional development in these areas is pretty much in place. The strategies for applying this knowledge base are not, and this is in part because the political will of the country is still not strong enough to support the translation of research to practice.

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Selman, R. (2003). *The Promotion of Social Awareness: Powerful Lessons from the Partnership of Developmental Theory and Classroom Practice*, NY, NY: Russell Sage Foundation.