

BOOK REVIEW

The Promotion of Social Awareness: Powerful Lessons from The Partnership of Developmental Theory and Classroom Practice by Robert Selman. New York: Russell Sage Foundation. 2003. 325 pp.

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For the past three decades, Robert Selman has combined path-breaking psychological research on children's social development with equally path-breaking research on its clinical and educational implications. The *Promotion of Social Awareness* provides a reflective summary of his outstanding contributions to psychology and education. Yet the *Promotion of Social Awareness* offers far more than a retrospective look at one the most successful research programs in recent history. This volume gives readers a rare glimpse into the soul of a psychologist, who invested a lifetime into putting his research at the service of others.

Preparing to become a psychologist in training, Selman learned early on that helping troubled children first required understanding them. His earliest clinical encounters led him to explore how children develop the compe-

tence to take the perspective of others and to coordinate those perspectives with their own. Selman drew the developmental road map of perspective-taking, which directed all later work on the skills and strategies involved in becoming a competent relational partner. Selman's description of the stages of perspective-taking have become a classic in cognitive developmental psychology.

In my estimation, Selman is a character educator *par excellence*. Although much of his work is classified as social in contrast to moral development, Selman makes clear in this book that he has throughout his career been engaged in issues that are moral in nature. For example, Selman derived his well-known stages of perspective-taking from responses to a moral dilemma (The "Holly Dilemma"). As he moved from analyzing children's responses to

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a hypothetical dilemma to fostering their social competence in real life settings in the playground and classroom, he formulated what he calls in this book an “ethic of social relationship.” As he points out, this ethic consciously engages value issues, which are at the very heart of all relationships.

From the beginning of his research, Selman used theoretical advances to anchor sound applied programs. Not content to diagnose patients in the clinic that he directed as developmentally delayed, Selman sought to invent powerful ways of overcoming obstacles to children’s development. Working with children in pairs and later classroom groups, Selman and his colleagues produced a variety of ingenious approaches for promoting social development. In their more recent work, Selman and his colleagues have focused less on clinical applications and more on educational interventions. In working in schools, Selman and his colleagues have devoted themselves to teaching children in urban settings. The last section of the book presents the most recent of Selman’s projects – a literacy program that simultaneously develops social awareness.

Readers of Selman’s previous writings are accustomed to his liberal use of example and case studies. Selman invites his readers to look at the same material that he and his asso-

ciates labored over to produce their psychological and educational models. Too many books on psychology and education present readers with finished products without giving an adequate description of the process that led their conclusions. Selman invites his readers to become partners in an ongoing inquiry. In this way, readers not only learn about Selman’s work but are challenged to do their own thinking and push further into the frontiers opened up by Selman’s pioneering studies.

This is a must-read book for the responsible character educator seeking to integrate sound psychological theory with practice. Selman does not pretend that psychology has all of the answers. He is a humble scholar, who shows again and again how teachers and children have enriched him. Selman demonstrates that character education deserves to be a field unto itself. The interactions that teachers have with their students are worthy of our most careful reflection because, as Selman so convincingly demonstrates, the most well designed curriculum will not bear fruit without good teaching. What is good teaching? Selman makes a sound case that good teaching is rooted in the best practices of character education. Character educators will find this volume to be as encouraging as they find it edifying.