Portraits

Portrait of Siegfried Ramler

This is the first in a series of "portraits" of notable educators written by Mark Goldberg, an administrator in the Shoreham-Wading River Central School District on Long Island, New York. In future issues of Educational Leadership, Goldberg will offer biographical portraits based on personal interviews with Madeline Hunter, James Gray, Reuven Feuerstein, Seymour Papert, Dennis Littky, and others. In this article he writes about Siegfried Ramler, whose career has taken him from translator at the Nuremberg trials to his current role as administrator at Punahou School in Hawaii.

When Sig Ramler talks, the German of his Viennese youth remains firmly and beautifully admixed with his English, a constant reminder of his extraordinary internationalism. Ramler is Director of Instructional Services and Coordinator of Curriculum at Punahou School in Hawaii, the largest independent school in the U.S. Set on 76 acres in Honolulu, the K-12 college preparatory school has almost 4,000 students and 250 faculty members. Punahou's student body is cosmopolitan, its curriculum demanding and culturally global. Ramler's worldview influence is visible not only on the campus but also in the larger community.

He is the Executive Director and a founder of the Foundation for Study in Hawaii and Abroad, which over the course of 20 years has sent 1,500 students to Japan, Tahiti, and China for summer exchanges and which conducts programs for students from the Pacific region in Hawaii. He is a founding member of the Japan-America Society of Honolulu, having also served as program chair and president. Ramler belongs to the Crown Prince Akihito Scholarship Committee, which grants funds for graduate study in Hawaii and in Japan. He is also a member of the Honolulu Council on Foreign Relations, which provides a forum for internationally prominent leaders to meet with groups of Hawaiian citizens who have a serious interest in foreign affairs. In addition, he serves on the Governor's Congress to examine Hawaii's role in the international community.

Origin of a Global Perspective

Ramler works 60 hours a week and travels frequently to mainland United States, China, Japan, Tahiti, and less often to Europe. Fluent in English, French, and German, he knows enough Japanese and Chinese to be...
"functionally literate" as a traveler. He has found time in his extensive career for a summer Fulbright to Israel and for two weeks last winter in the Soviet Union. But the true wellspring of Ramler’s internationalism was, and continues to be, his work as an interpreter at the Nuremberg Trials while in his early and mid-20s.

Ramler says that he could not help but think in global terms, surrounded as he was by speakers of English, French, German, and Russian (the official languages of the trial), as well as by colleagues, spectators, witnesses, and members of the press from all over the world. The trial itself raised fundamental questions of individual and collective responsibility that went beyond any national border. Of course Ramler’s perspective was constrained by “the fact that I was preoccupied with the linguistic or technical aspects of my work, with the simultaneous interpretation.” (Simultaneous interpretation as a recognized practice in international meetings was virtually invented and then perfected by Ramler and the other linguists in his group at Nuremberg.) He participated in pre-trial interrogation and translated many hours of testimony at the trial for such major Nazi defendants as Goering, Hess, Jodl, Speer, and von Ribbentrop.

The first years after the trials ended were taken up by marriage in 1949 to a Hawaiian court reporter, by travel, completion of undergraduate and graduate education, the beginning of a new job in Hawaii, and raising a family. As a teacher of French and German at Punahou, a job he accepted in 1951, Ramler felt that for teaching to be effective in a community, it cannot take place in isolation or a vacuum. There must be an echo in the community, there must be activities that reinforce the experiences taking place within the school. The school life within walls, without contact with the community is limiting and eventually sterile.

This attitude remained with him when he became head of the foreign language department and ultimately the curriculum and instructional services director. His career can be seen in ever-expanding circles that took him and Punahou and education in Hawaii farther and deeper into the larger world.

An Expanding Global View

It was instinctual for Sig Ramler to look back to his European heritage and help bring the Alliance Française to Hawaii in 1961. Ramler’s next global adventure was to French Polynesia to start an exchange program with Pacific peoples under French administration and cultural influence. He simultaneously helped create the Pan Pacific Program (supported by the Foundation for Study Abroad), which was warmly received in Japan and later expanded to include the People’s Republic of China one year before normalization of relations between the U.S. and China.

It was a natural extension of Sig Ramler’s work to become the national chair of ASCD’s Task Force on Global Education, a role that may be the capstone of his long career, since ASCD has identified global education as a main focus for its future. The Task Force’s fundamental belief is that education must become more committed to the interdependence of nations and to the commonality of planetary interests. The Task Force will offer options and resources to ASCD and its affiliates for putting that belief into practice.

When asked to reflect on the reasons for his commitment to internationalism, Ramler replied:

My life has been almost from the very beginning a multi-national life. I suppose out of that springs a natural inclination toward looking at issues from a global perspective... I've always been filled with the conviction that what we as human beings have in common is far more significant than what divides us... While we should cherish aspects of national culture and heritage that can enrich us and enhance our creativity and appreciation, I think it's also important to realize that we have a common international heritage.

Without question, the most powerful expression of Ramler’s internationalism is the Pan Pacific Program, an effort begun 20 years ago and now firmly rooted in the educational life of Hawaii. Each year, secondary students from all over Hawaii and a few youngsters from the mainland apply to spend six weeks during the summer in China, Japan, or Tahiti. Once accepted, a student undergoes extensive orientation, including language study and an introduction to the civilization and customs of the host country. Hawaiian students either stay with a host family (in Japan and in Tahiti) or are linked with a family while living in a university dormitory (in China). In the host country, they study the language, attend lectures, participate in cultural and sports events, and have many unstructured experiences with their host families. The program works in reverse, of course, when youngsters from the cooperating countries come to Hawaii.

Ramler takes pride in the Pan Pacific Program and the abiding influence it has had on both Hawaiian and foreign students. "To me, the single most satisfying aspect of this work is the lives that have been given direction as a result of these experiences in terms of career, of contributions to society in their respective countries." An outstanding example is Masaru Kawase, a visiting student from Japan 20 years ago, now one of Japan’s leading interpreters and the recent co-author of a book on cross-cultural communication. Kawase often acknowledges the centrality of the Pan Pacific experience that pointed him in the direction of his career.

The Work at Punahou

The main focus of Ramler’s energy and the place where he spends most of his time is Punahou School. His international perspective is seen in his early work to expand language offerings and in the techniques he uses today to bring about curricular change. When Ramler joined the faculty in 1951, only
French and German were taught, and they as two-year sequences. By 1971, when he left the department chair to take his current position, French, German, Spanish, Japanese, and Mandarin Chinese were the languages offered; they are now taught in six-year sequences. In addition, Hawaiian and Latin are available for elective language study. In his new position, Ramler quickly transferred his globalism from the language department to the entire school. The influences of his own rigorous secondary education in a Viennese gymnasium and in a British upper school, his belief in seriousness of purpose but great intellectual freedom for knowledgeable, motivated people, and his dedication to "development, change, innovation" soon resonated throughout Punahou.

Believing strongly that curriculum cannot be left to chance, Ramler advocates "formal, structured, cyclical review of a given subject matter." He also understands "that curriculum ... must grow from consensus among faculty, from the sharing of ideas, from an examination of existing activities." For example, when four Punahou teachers became interested in creating a European Studies course, they had to formulate their ideas and apply for funds for a summer curriculum project.

Ramler's expectations were that the teachers would examine the needs for change "in terms of concept, in terms of teaching approach, in terms of teaching materials." There was, of course, no existing text, so the teachers of art, history, literature, and science had to select their own materials.

Ramler constantly talks of forums and alternatives and consensus and opportunities. He is a statesman at work in education, recalling the dialogues among students in his Gymnasium in the Vienna of the mid-1930s, the careful sifting through of evidence at the international forum for justice at Nuremberg, and the techniques learned from his various studies in Vienna, London, Erlangen, and later in Paris (Sorbonne) and Honolulu. He believes in meetings, discussions, careful preparation, and, finally, allowing a group of intelligent, motivated, imaginative teachers freedom to "cult the best possible resources from a variety of areas."

The Work Ahead
Each year Ramler takes on new responsibilities and seeks new adventures. His work pace is "hectic," yet he still finds time to run 20 or more miles each week, usually very early in the morning, is able to work 12 hours each day with pleasure and ease, and is constantly in the center of, for example, upgrading the libraries at Punahou, approving conferences or sabbaticals for staff members, planning a speech in Seattle on simultaneous interpreting, flying to Washington for another meeting of the ASCD Task Force on Global Education, or making arrangements for yet another exchange with Japan, Tahiti, or China. He has retained the dignity and bearing of his Viennese youth, yet punctuates conversations that grow ponderous with clever puns. Ramler is already making plans for the 1990s and the years beyond. He will continue to travel, to meet people, to work at Punahou for change and improvement. His strongest impulse from adolescence on, he told me, has been to explore the "potential of dialogue leading to understanding, to enlarging one's horizons."

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