AN INTRODUCTION TO STEVE RAMSANKAR OF ALEX TAYLOR COMMUNITY SCHOOL

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EDITOR’S NOTE: In this article, Charles Hart provides necessary background for understanding the article that follows on pp. 334–348, “Creative Curriculum for an Inner City: A Case Study of Alex Taylor Community School,” on which he collaborated with Steve Ramsankar.

With respect to my teaching career, the people of Alex Taylor Community School serve as renewing human symbols for me. At a time when I thought I could not go on with a profession in which teachers and students are often looked upon as objects for dehumanized inspection, the community of Alex Taylor School renewed my desire to return to teaching and to continue seeking ways to educate humanely.

The foundation for much educational research and teacher training in North America has been the behavioristic assumptions of “effective schools” literature. According to Hunter, professional competence of teachers “is based on what a teacher does, not what a teacher is.”¹ This approach to education deliberately ignores questions about being, objectifying teachers as a “what,” not a “who.” The likely reason for such an approach is the difficulty of defining what is inside a person. It is easier to talk only about making everyone’s observable behaviors the same instead of recognizing and nurturing uniqueness. But there are also important reasons to search for understandings and answers to the enigmatic questions “Who are teachers?” and “Who can they become?”

This means that in addition to learning effective teaching behaviors, educators should search for what it means to live and teach on the margins of their possibilities. Aoki affirmed this idea in a 1988 convocation address at the University of Lethbridge: “We need to learn what it means to sing the song of inspiredness. We can do so by studying those who are living on the

¹Madeline Hunter, Improving Instruction (Los Angeles: UCLA, 1984), p. 1
edge and what they do."  

Aoki’s counsel reinforces the importance of asking questions about being, and it suggests that an approach for such inquiry is to study those who “sing” about the edges of life in order to find more clues for how to pursue meaningful living.

**MY RELATIONSHIP WITH A SINGER OF DELIGHT**

I first became aware of Dr. Steve Ramsankar in October 1985, as I watched a segment of the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation’s television series *Man Alive*. I was deeply touched by the program, entitled “School as a Loving Place,” but I tucked the memory away in my brain until the following year, when I experienced a life-changing event—a “heuristic encounter.”  

I attended a presentation by Ramsankar at the Eighth Bergamo Conference on Curriculum Theory and Classroom Practice in Dayton, Ohio. At the close of his presentation, Ramsankar quietly shared hugs with a group of international educators. As I stood in line waiting for an embrace, I realized that this Canadian-inspired principal was not only lovingly touching the lives of the students in his Edmonton school, but he was also reaching out to serve the love-starved lives of a larger adult community.

Later that evening, I discovered that Ramsankar literally is an inspirited singer. As a group of educators sat informally and discussed ideas presented at the conference, Ramsankar began to sing a couple of patriotic songs—“O Canada,” followed by “God Bless America.” Soon a whole chorus of us were singing campfire, calypso, and popular songs. I could not remember the last time I had sung for enjoyment. Singing is now a more common yet mysterious aspect of my psyche that reminds me not just to dwell on problems of the individual self but also to search continually for my choral connections with others.

In the spring of 1987, I applied and was accepted to a doctoral program in education at the University of Alberta. I selected the University of Alberta in part because it allowed me to work in Edmonton with Ramsankar. Instead of remaining a “phantom of delight” in my memory, I wanted to see him “upon a nearer view,” as a “spirit, yet a [man] too,” and eventually to help myself and others to be more able to “see with eye serene” who this “being breathing thoughtful breath” really was.

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2Ted Tetsuo Aoki, “Celebrating the Meaning of Being” (unpublished commencement address presented at the graduation ceremonies of the University of Lethbridge, Lethbridge, Alberta, May 1988)


IMPLEMENTING A REFLECTIVE INQUIRY

In September 1987, I approached Ramsankar about the possibility of writing a paper with him about Alex Taylor Community School. Previous studies by Virginia Macagnoni, Nelson Haggerson, and Janice Tyrwhitt had focused on interpretations of the essential characteristics of the school, such as "aliveness," "spirit," "loving," or "actions." Each work helped describe what happened at the school, but the language used was not the same as the words I heard Ramsankar use in describing his vision of leadership to the students and teachers at Alex Taylor.

I found myself wondering whether Ramsankar's "personal practical knowledge" could be defined by using more of Ramsankar's actual vocabulary. My aim was not to persuade other teachers to think or perform the same behaviors he did; instead, I hoped to provide a detailed analysis of how Ramsankar framed his vision and actions of leadership. Thus, I proposed that we concentrate on writing a naturalistic overview of Ramsankar's instructional leadership.

Ramsankar agreed to six "participant observation" visitations over a four-week period. Attempting to adopt the field procedures of Bruce Barnett's and David Dwyer's Peer Assisted Leadership (PAL), I shadowed Ramsankar for over 20 hours, taking detailed field notes. I observed a variety of interactions: a school dinner for senior citizens; daily interactions with children, staff, and others; an evening parents' meeting; planning sessions with the secretary; a meeting and lunch with the Brownie volunteers; a class graduation and school awards assembly; the first day of a new school term; staff meetings; and an interview and filming for a city television broadcast. Ramsankar was unexpectedly called away only once, the morning I observed the regular Thursday morning school assembly; but even when he was absent, I sensed that routine activities carried on as if he were actually present. I was able to confirm this impression when I observed him conduct a subsequent assembly and noted how similar the formats for each were.

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James P. Spradley, Participant-observation (Toronto: Holt, Rhinehart, and Winston, 1979)

I did not conduct reflective interviews immediately after each shadow, as the PAL methodology suggests; but I did ask Ramsankar to reflect on my observations and questions as time permitted during my shadowing of him. Or I would ask him follow-up questions during my subsequent observations. I also continued to collect examples of speeches he had given at conferences; these formed a base of Ramsankar's written reflections. Finally, I assembled all the data and began the task of clustering images and themes into a case study of his leadership style.

I shared a preliminary draft with Ramsankar for his review and critique. This initiated a process of rewriting, revising, and editing. Ramsankar taught me that a document for public presentation requires considerable time, careful review, and critical assistance from others. He had at least four readers provide feedback and recommendations about our study. After five months of revisions and reflective interviews, we reached a consensus on a final version. It was not totally in Ramsankar's own words, which are rich in images about teaching children and parents; nor was it entirely in my writing style, which tends to organize actions and ideas by playing with the sounds and meanings of words. Nevertheless, we both believed that our case study discussed significant aspects about Ramsankar's work that had not been articulated in previous studies: his reflections about 20 years of administrative practice, his knowledge of community programs for an inner-city school, and his vision for future multicultural education.

**SMALL THINGS THAT COUNT IN TEACHING**

In personally assaying what is most important about our study, I would say that Ramsankar taught me to look again at the small details of teaching. His belief that "saying 'hello' is a teaching activity" is one I have experienced every time I have visited his school. I was always welcomed with arms that hugged and ears that listened and cared about the tone of my hello. After two years of working with Ramsankar, those daily greetings mean more to me than the scores of assemblies, dinners, programs, and activities that happened at Alex Taylor Community School. The staging of "big" events is not what is most significant about Ramsankar's work, from my perspective. Instead, the small daily interactions serve as the glue that holds everything together and makes his teaching-administrative leadership come alive.

Perhaps I can illustrate Ramsankar's inherent dedication to teaching by relating an incident that was not included in our collaborative paper but that occurred on the first day of my shadowing him. During the school's dinner for senior citizens, one of the guests leaned close to Ramsankar and quietly asked, "How many teachers do you have on staff?" Ramsankar's immediate reply was, "Counting myself, 10." As I reflect on that answer, I am impressed that it came so naturally and quickly after 19 years of occupying a leadership position. At the time, he was not teaching any specific groups of students. Yet...
when asked about his staff, Ramsankar emphatically counted himself as a teacher.

When I asked another principal the same question, she responded that she had “5.7 teachers at [her] school.” The administrative way of funding schooling affected how she defined who teachers were. This administrator thought of the part of herself that taught two afternoon classes and the part of another person who taught a morning kindergarten class as fractions of teachers. And, if this particular principal had been working in a school that did not require that she teach part of the time, she may not have included herself at all in a count of teachers.

In comparison, Ramsankar’s reply was stated in whole numbers. According to his school budget, he actually received funding for 8.3 teachers that year. Yet, he preferred to count in terms of whole persons. While the method of funding could suggest he count with a decimal point, Ramsankar tended to think in wholes: each staff member, whether full-time or fractional, is a complete teacher, just as he, a nonteaching principal, is still a teacher. In my experience, the power and responsibilities of a principalship frequently set up invisible lines of demarcation between administrators and teachers. By the ways in which he personally conceptualized his and others’ roles at school, Ramsankar seemed able to cut through some of those barriers.

I have repeated this brief incident because it serves as a personal mnemonic for me. First, it reminds me how important it is to “count myself” as a teacher. Some teachers and principals I have met seem to want a very narrow definition of teacher—one that admits only those actively practicing their trade in elementary or secondary classrooms. This type of constricted interpretation excludes school administrators from being a part of the teaching domain, and consequently builds up isolating walls between school administrators and classroom teachers. Such walls restrict reflection and communication about what really counts—striving to understand everything involved in the complex and difficult processes and tasks of teaching children.

Secondly, Ramsankar’s method of counting prompts me not to be trapped by letter grades or percentages. Numbers and graded symbols seem to say a great deal in a society that longs for quantitative representations. But grades and numbers can never adequately express the worth of individuals or their talents. Although teachers and administrators must evaluate the development of others and, in many cases, attach a grade to their evaluation, the more important teaching challenge is to understand relationships (whether with colleagues or pupils or parents or visitors) in terms of “whole persons.” And one of the ways I can strive to look for wholeness in my relationships is to count small things—an exchange of “hellos” or three-word replies to a visitor’s question—as treasured teaching moments with people of incalculable worth.

RENEWING MEANINGS OF TEACHING

In reflecting on how Ramsankar has changed my outlook on education, I would say that he has renewed my sense of what it is to be a teacher. This
rejuvenation began when I heard him define his philosophy of education. “Part of my purpose as an educator is to help others discover their divine yet individual purposes for living.” Every child and adult has God-given reasons for existing, but they must uncover their individual meanings for themselves. A teacher cannot give others their meanings for living, but a teacher can help by faithfully and lovingly inviting them to step onto their own thresholds of possibilities. This vision is the cornerstone to Ramsankar’s approach to education.

Building on his clearly defined purpose, Ramsankar has dedicated his life to serving the people who attend Alex Taylor Community School. And he has accomplished much in his 20 years at Alex Taylor: providing nutritious snacks for hungry children, food and clothing for needy families, language education for parents, and nutritious dinners for the elderly; establishing supportive community relationships with the police; and creating a school that serves as a family for its community’s multicultural needs, celebrations, and education. Ramsankar’s achievements have required a great deal of time, effort, help, and sacrifice. Somehow, he always keeps serving others as much as he is able, but the needs of the community never abate.

As a result, much remains to be done. The problems society faces each day—hunger, crime, brutality, neglect, war—cannot be solved by one individual but by many people who learn to understand what their respective purposes and responsibilities are within the contexts of their lives. I cannot be another Dr Steve Ramsankar. Nor can I simply replicate his approach to education at another school site. To read our case study with such an imitative hope would be a gross misinterpretation of our intent. We did not write together to laud Ramsankar’s successes nor to encourage others to be exactly as he is. Purposes and actions can and should vary, just as people and their surrounding sites are always changing.

Consequently, I must learn to live with the universal constant of individual difference: “Every person who has ever lived has lived an unbroken succession of unique occasions.” This means that the key value I see in Ramsankar’s philosophy of discovering “divine yet individual purposes for living” is that it challenges me to choose responsible reasons and means for living together with others. This cannot be done easily. Fackenheim likens the dilemmas involved in making such choices to a fictional character created by Kafka who spends his entire life attempting to find out from others if the course of life he is pursuing is the right one; it is not until the character is dying that he discovers that no one could ever have verified the appropriateness of his life’s path because “There is only one right road for a man, and that he cannot know whether it is right except by embarking upon it.”

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In its own way, my work with Ramsankar repeatedly motivates me to embark onward. And I hope the article that follows can help revitalize the responsible commitment of other educators to face the varied challenges that each classroom full of pupils presents.

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