

# Introduction to Special Theme Section

## Ralph Mosher: An Introduction and Tribute

Norman A. Sprinthall  
Professor Emeritus  
North Carolina State University

My professional experience with Ralph Mosher began some 38 years ago in 1961. We were both graduate students at Harvard, were research assistants on the same project, finished our doctoral studies within a year and were co-investigators with John Whiteley on our first school-based research project funded through the U. S. Office of Education. I always think of these first few years as my own coming of age. Ralph was enormously helpful to me in translating the Harvard mystique, making it less formidable. Words like sanguine, proffer, jejune or putative were banded about as if everyone there was studying aloud for the G.R.E. Verbal. Ralph had a Churchillian command of the language. Also, and most importantly Ralph always would comment that H.G.S.E.'s fascination with theoretical constructs was only part of the story. That's when I met the first of his metaphors. Why would we actually work in schools versus staying in the Ivory (Ivy) Tower? Willie Sutton the famous Minneapolis bank robber was asked why he robbed banks. "That's where the money is" said Willie. "Why work in schools?" "That's where the teachers and students are," was Ralph's comment.

Of course, it wasn't the "life of Riley" working with Ralph. As our colleagues wrote yet another critique of education, we would pile out of Larsen Hall and together with a group of graduate students would head to the schools. Ralph felt that the secondary school curriculum was too narrow and too much like collegiate education, an "idolatry of the intellect" or "education from the neck up" as he would say. This meant that we needed a more potent form, an approach that combined intellectual rigor with the lived reality that the teenagers were experiencing. So we began a long series of trials. And as each plan failed, we would review our errors and revise and try again with different methods for teaching. After a particular sequence of failed methods, Ralph would comment wryly, "Well, Norman, once more we have snatched defeat from the jaws of victory" and so "Once more up "Breeds Hill"!"

Eventually, we did manage to uncover a successful ap-

proach namely the social role-taking curriculum with class sections focused on peer counseling, peer & cross-age teaching. It was as Ralph was quick to point out an up-date of John Dewey, learning by doing combined with careful reflection. The new 3 R's included role-taking, reflection, and rigor. It was also fortuitous that we began our association with Larry Kohlberg. Our first set of findings with the role-taking curriculum indicated, as we had hoped that the high school students demonstrated modestly significant gains on measures of Loevinger's ego stages from social conformity toward individuation. The outcome fit nicely with our predictions but then came the surprise. The experimental groups also showed modest gains on the Kohlberg scales of moral maturity yet we had never presented the students with the dilemma discussion method or in anyway mentioned Kohlberg's theory. However, in discussions with Larry, he quickly pointed out that our curriculum was an exact fit with his theory as well as George Herbert Mead's work. The role-taking was creating the means for the teenagers to develop a greater perspective-taking ability e.g. to put themselves in the shoes of another, and then through our dialogue with them in their weekly journals plus selected readings they expanded their moral comprehension of concepts such as altruism. Whether we would have figured this out ourselves later is a moot point. Larry's help was a theoretical breakthrough by a focus on the relation between theory and practice that included the moral/ethical component. This indeed became the basis for a series of publications in what Ralph coined as a project in Deliberate Psychological Education. The direct object of our work was to promote the psychological maturity of adolescents.

Of course, not all this work was positively received. Major theorists such as Jane Loevinger thought that we were experimenting *on* teenagers and should stick to basic research, a position which she later modified. Also we were strongly criticized at a special APA sponsored conference focused on psychology for secondary schools. Our view was that adolescents deserved something more than a wa-

tered down version of Intro. Psych. at the college level. The establishment in Counselor Education was very uneasy about teaching counseling skills to teenagers, prompting Ralph to remark somewhat pointedly that the top half of our high school students was superior to the bottom half of our Harvard graduate students in our masters' program. That remark did create a stir but it also indicated that we were deadly serious vis a vis the importance of this work to secondary students. They were far more than passive recipients of somewhat arbitrary pieces of curriculum. They had serious roles to play and tasks to perform, even though it was then considered a heretical by the professional establishment. Yet, even here the establishment did come around. APA did elect us to Fellow status on the basis of this work.

Soon, however, our collegueship took a different turn. Harvard in its infinite wisdom had decided to effectively close both the counseling and teaching programs in the 1970's. Ralph noted that H.G.S.E. had defoliated the approaches to teacher and counselor education. It was time to find new and more fertile ground. It also meant that we would be separated geographically. Yet after 10 years of battling obstacles at Harvard, geography just became one new drawback. So our collegueship continued working in far away places like Portugal, Moscow, and the United Kingdom. The U. K. trip included a hilarious ride through the back roads near Bristol attempting to find the remote farm home of Dean Ben Morris - "We can't get there from here," Ralph uttered after the British directions of "fly overs." "Go to the bottom of the road and take the second turn on the second round about" that left us on a dead end rut. Or the time at the banquet at the conclusion of the Moscow conference when we both tried to learn a native Tatar dance, much to the bemusement of our hosts.

There were also a string of conferences and presentations in this country, a series at Irvine (including one moment when Ralph, Larry Kohlberg and I were swimming in increasingly greater surf. After one huge wave tumbled us into forms like pretzels, Ralph said "One more like that and developmental education ends and the public schools return to Beowulf and Joyce as the curriculum for human development.") and other places some quite unusual like a Women's prison, a below zero conference in Vermont, a conference of special educators in Tampa (there we tried to convince them that the world of education was larger than reinforcement theory or as Ralph said, "B. F. Skinner, three years and a cloud of dust"). It seems as if we were always in motion. Ralph had said that in his earlier days north of the border as a hockey player he could skate like the wind, so too as an educator who carried the message, "like the wind."

It is perhaps somewhat ironic that it took a Canadian to help us in the lower forty-eight to understand the ideas of our own John Dewey. His translation, of course, was based on literally hundreds of hours of actual school practice in his now famous "Just Community School" model. Rome wasn't built in a day as the saying goes and neither was an effective secondary school based on concepts of social justice. The incredible achievement of his work in practice, in

publications, and most importantly in the generations of scholars he advised needs to be recognized for what it is, a profound reorganization of education for a democratic republic. Of course, Ralph himself was personally diffident, (he raised anti-hubris to new heights) was reluctant to claim credit due. There was always on the horizon further work, another book, another article to clarify and expand the ideas and practice. In fact working with him, near or far was a bit like living in Vygotsky's zone of proximal growth. There was always more to do.

Thus it came as no surprise to find at the very end of his life, after fighting against Parkinson's disease for twenty years, with his weight down to just over 100 pounds, and his once powerful voice reduced to a whisper, his body wracked with dis-kensia - still working on a book, asking me to include a section by my spouse and her colleague and their new research on supervision into his work. Indeed our profession has now lost one of the great democratic educators of the last half of the twentieth century. He produced an innovative model by applying developmental theory in concert with a developmental pedagogy, the ground plan for a long lived legacy.

<sup>1</sup>Always a stickler for accuracy Ralph was one of few who knew that the Battle of Bunker Hill was actually fought on nearby Breeds Hill.