

Critical Imagination for Invitational Theory, Research and Practice

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The idea of "inviting school success" began and developed through critical and imaginative acts. Dissatisfaction with conceptualizations of school practices that negated the heart of the educative process, led to the development of an alternative framework that was more sensitive to the perceptual realities and ethical responsibilities of participants in the educative process. Imaginative invitational thinkers asked such questions as: What if we used a metaphor of "doing with" rather than "doing to" as a framework for looking at the teacher-student relationship? What if we focused on the invitational qualities of the messages intended, extended, received, and acted upon in school settings? What if we tried to make schools "the most inviting place in town?" What if we formed a network of educators who were sympathetic to these ideas? With this imaginative inception, texts have been written (Novak, 1992; Purkey, 1978; Purkey & Novak, 1984; Purkey & Strahan, 1986; Purkey & Schmidt, 1987; Purkey & Novak, 1988; Purkey & Stanley, 1991; Wilson, 1986), an International Alliance for Invitational Education has been formed, and a conceptual model (Purkey and Schmidt, 1987) has been developed. Thus, educators seeking to promote inviting practices have ample resources.

Continuing this tradition of critical and imaginative thinking, this article examines what might happen if this what if thinking were applied to invitational theory, research, and practice. In this article, a series of what if questions are used to step back from and refocus the efforts of those involved in promoting invitational education in order to keep alive the critical-imaginative touch that has been vital for much of its success.

Success in promoting inviting practices does not guarantee success in theory development and research. It might even make it more difficult—why look too closely at a good thing; or if it's not broken, why fix it? However, without sustained and systematic inquiry, the words "inviting school success" run the risk of becoming only an enthusiastic battle-cry ("What do we want? Inviting! When do we want it? Now!") or a mere reminder ("Have you invited your students today?"). Although battle-cries and reminders may have their place, if we are to have a serious and sustained effect on education we need to do much more than this. Thus, this article is

based on the assumption that if invitational education is worth promoting, it is worth studying. Serious study is, I believe, the highest intellectual tribute that can be paid to any theory. With the inception of a new journal that seeks to promote the study, application, and research of invitational theory, this seems an appropriate time and place to imaginatively refocus our thoughts and efforts.

In this article, I first will turn hypothetically imagined critical eyes to some internal and external dimensions of invitational theory. Next, I will apply these theoretical analyses to research and practice. Finally, I will propose a framework for the integration of theory, research, and practice.

Imagining Theory

Theory can be thought of as a way of thinking about an area of interest. With that in mind, invitational theory is a way of thinking about the genesis and consequences of messages considered, intended, extended, received and acted upon in calling forth the development of human potential. This process involves a complex and interconnected series of intentions, actions, evaluations, and modifications.

The basic concepts and relationships of the inviting approach have been graphically and systematically summarized in the invitational model (Purkey & Schmidt, 1987). Here we have a succinct and clear depiction of the essential elements of the stance, levels of functioning, and processes that are intended to lead to beneficial outcomes. Certainly, clarity and brevity are strengths; however, they also can be weaknesses in that they may miss the subtleties, intricacies, and varied consequences of the inviting approach. Critical analysis of the inviting approach points out some of these weaknesses.

What critical analysis and development try to do is analyze limitations in present conceptualizations and point out possibilities for improvement. This self-correcting process of conceptual development is essential for preventing a theory from becoming a dogma. Certainly development is important for a theory of practice perspective.

To assist us in the process of theory development, what if we invited two noted theoreticians to help us think about invitational theory? Imagine that we have invited Donald Schon, author of *Theory and Practice* (Argyris & Schon, 1974), *The Reflective Practitioner* (1983), and *Educating the Reflective Practitioner* (1987) to consult with us about the process of inviting. Let us also imagine we invited Abraham Edel, philosopher and author of *Interpreting Education* (1985), to consult with us about the moral agenda of inviting school success. Imagine that Schon addresses us first and reads the following report:

Donald Schon's Report (Imagine this was read to us)

Please excuse the reading of this report but time is very limited and I wish to get to the heart of the issue. As I read the literature on invitational education in general, and the inviting process in particular, I find it simultaneously ambiguous and hopeful. Let me address the ambiguous side first.

As you know, my work deals with the development of professional artistry. I have pointed out the limitations and irrelevance of an overreliance on a technical rationality that "holds that practitioners are instrumental problem solvers who select technical means best suited to particular purposes" Schon (1983, p..3). I have argued that this does not work, nor is it what successful practitioners really do in complicated situations. It does not work because professional knowledge is not the mechanical application of certain truths. Professional practice is really based on a self-correcting way of thinking and acting that involves the continual transformation of values and means. To describe this approach I have developed an epistemology of practice that focuses on knowing-in-action, reflection-in-action, and reflection on reflection-in-action. These are not meant to be concepts derived from remote theory but types of thinking that artistic practitioners use as they successfully deal with the uncertainty, uniqueness, and value conflicts in their professions.

Invitational education seems to vacillate between prescribing a technical rationality (here are the steps you follow to guarantee success) and an epistemology of practice (successful inviters "listen to the ice"). The invitational model, although it might be useful for presentation and promotional purposes, runs the risk of promoting technical rationality. With its neat boxes and arrows, it intimates that there is an instrumental calculus for solving invitational problems. As people involved in the inviting process know, this is not so. On the other hand, attention to reading situations and making adjustments accordingly seem to focus on the dynamics of the invitational process. Since artistry comes from a sensitivity to the situation and the techniques used, this is the approach that I favor. Perhaps the invitational model helps people get started by giving them a way to see how ideas can come together as an integrated whole. This is a good start, but you cannot stop there.

Another ambiguity I have come across deals with the actual intention of the inviting process. There appear to be at least three ways in which success in inviting has been conceptualized. First, it has been implicitly conceptualized as a monologue, a performance done for somebody. Statements such as "holding the point," "making it look easy is the hard part," and "practice, practice, practice"

conjure up the image of a polished performer who is seeking to have his or her act

down pat. What is lacking in this conceptualization is the "doing with other people." Monologues, no matter how polished, are still primarily one-way activities. A second conceptualization of the inviting process involves a "doing with" element, but in some ways it seems analagous to selling. People in sales use skills to find out what you want, get you interested in what they have to sell, and successfully close the deal. The point of sales, from the salesperson's perspective, is to get the customer to buy any of the products—the more expensive the better tht the salesperson has to sell. Being driven by the "bottom line," the art of the deal is to move the products that are in stock. In this conceptualization of the inviting process, both parties are involved, but there is a predetermined end and a lack of mutuality. It seems to me very possible for a person in sales to go through the inviting skills and find some very helpful suggestions for selling products people may not really want or need.

A third conceptualization of the inviting process emphasizes a mutuality in the "doing with" relationship. Mutuality here means "an exchange not only of respect but also of personal and cultural 'gifts' in such a manner that both giver and receiver are enhanced in their dignity and enriched in their existence" (Freeman, 1987, p. 2). This seems akin to Martin Buber's "I-Thou" relationship and can be found in the concept of "withness" in invitational education, often expressed in such statements as "that class and I were really with each other today." Implied here is the idea that we really shared something of worth and we are enriched in the process.

It might be that invitational educators need to be great performers, skilled salespeople, and mutual partakers. The practice of each of these, however, requires different ethical considerations and ways of framing situations and responses. If the analogy of dance is used, watching a great performer is different than dancing with someone who uses dancing to sell you something, which is different from dancing with someone who wants to participate and share himself or herself and the music with you. The skills and intentions of each dancer are different; so are the relationships. I am hopeful that invitational educators can sort out these conceptual ambiguities and tensions and can go on to the more interesting problems of identifying artful practitioners and discovering the specific knowledge and reflective processes they use.

Abraham Edel's Report (Imagine this is being read to us.)

After Donald Schon finishes his presentation, imagine Abraham Edel enters the room and goes to the podium to make the following comments:

Thank you for allowing me to address your group. Since time is of the essence, I'll be brief. I appreciate your continued efforts to refine, revise and reformulate your approach to education. That's what differentiates an educative approach from a dogmatic approach. Ultimately, if invitational education is truly a constructive approach to education that seeks the development of human potential, it will connect with important social problems. This seems to me to be necessary, possible, and desirable because invitational education, with its emphasis on a cluster of ideas like "beneficial," "potential," "optimism," "vision," "civility" and "humanely effective," has an implicit moral agenda: the betterment of our associated living, our living with, by, and for each other. For this moral agenda, the movement to a more inviting society, to be realized, invitational education will have to involve a mature idealism and a sober realism; it will have to be connected to the resolution of the deepest, most urgent problems we collectively face. To do less is to not be really serious about the development of human potential. I would like to present eight themes for consideration for the moral agenda of invitational education. These are themes I suggested in Interpreting Education, (Edel, 1985, pp. 135-151). Consideration of these themes might provide some guidance in developing inviting curricula and policies, two underdeveloped areas in Inviting School Success (Purkey & Novak, 1984).

1. Cultivate a Global Perspective An inviting society is one in which everybody counts. Since our world is vitally interconnected, "at the very least, the consequences of any social policy or program have to be worked out far enough to see what they would do to others throughout the world" (Edel, 1985, p. 136). To ignore that those outside of local or national boundaries are of value, worth, and can act responsibly, is to be less than inviting. This has serious implications regarding what we teach and how we teach it. For example, a global perspective would be necessary in subjects like geography, history, and science.

2. Expand Equality An inviting society is one which does not discriminate on grounds of race, color, class, sex, ethnic origin, or religion. Struggles for fair treatment in these areas are complex and ongoing. Inviting schools should develop policies and curriculum to enrich the meaning of equality. This begins with, and needs to go well beyond, analyzing textbooks for the quantity and quality of treatment of females and minority groups.

3. Deepen Democratization *The process of inviting focuses on meaningful participation in issues of importance. On a social level this would seem to involve "an open society with an increasingly enlightened citizenry controlling its own destiny" (Edel, 1985, p. 138). Therefore, "education has not merely the perennial task to create a responsible enlightened citizenry but the task to forge the special reconstructive standard by which to judge its work, a more thorough denwcratization" (p. 141). Inviting schools need to be participatng in this task of reconstructing the meaning of democracy.*

4. Shape a Responsible Technology *In contrasting the inviting family with the efficient factory model of schools (Purkey & Novak, 1984) invitational education seems to have a sensitivity for the impact of technological effects on the quality of people's lives. Technological development is not neutral. It effects the possibilities of a more satisfying life. Inviting schools need to emphasize the development of "technology with a human face" and assist people in making responsible choices about the knowledge, skills, and attitudes that are required to live in a world fit for a full and flourishing existence.*

5. Mute the Competitive Character of Our Culture *As I read invitational education, it seems to be saying, "Since we are all in this together, what can we do to make it more worthwhile?" This emphasis on cooperation and "doing with" advocates a movement away from the distortions caused by highly competitive social conditions. Invitational educators need to elaborate about the place of competition in schools and society. It might be that "the critique of the place of competitiveness in our culture may thus take shape as an effort to restore excellence as the interpretation of success rather than overcoming the other person" (Edel, 1985 , p. 144). Perhaps then we can truly "invite school success."*

6. Build a Sense of Community *The necessity of belonging and meeting affiliative needs is strongly stressed in invitational education. A sense of community, however, is more than just a psychological need. It is the basis for sharing what is held in common by way of communication. As I see it, "a sense of community can be cultivated only by rediscovering community of purposes that still exist in a common life, and by throwing sufficient light upon them to guide institutional reconstruction and give it organizational shape, opening the way to the growth of greater or stronger communal bonds" (Edel, 1975, p. 147). Schools should be inviting communities that enable people to communicate about important issues which affect their shared existence.*

7. Restore Humanistic Quality *By "humanistic" I mean a quality of life that has a continuity with the past and an emphasis on the production and distribution of goods and services of worth. Since an invitation is a cordial*

summoning to participate in something worthwhile, an inviting society, like an inviting school, pays serious attention to the quality of life it is implementing. An inviting theory of practice would examine and promote the necessary conditions for goods of worth to be produced and appreciated.

8. Reassess Schooling *This is not the best of all possible worlds and invitational education needs to avoid merely becoming a public relations manifesto for the status quo. If invitational education stresses only "being inviting" and ignores what is being invited, it runs the risk of uncritically accepting and merely sugar-coating the current practices of schooling. Steps have to be taken to provide criteria for compatibility with the inviting approach: (1) Is there a perceptual orientation? (2) Is there an emphasis on the self? (3) Is the approach humanely effective? (4) Does the approach encourage applicability? (Purkey & Schmidt, 1987, pp. 106-108). This is a good beginning for considering theories and techniques of counseling, although even here concepts like "humanely effective" and "encourage applicability" need further analysis and refinement. I would hope that when more specific criteria are developed for education they include an emphasis on the self-in-relation and the educational quality of the object of the invitation, along with the previously mentioned seven themes.*

In closing, I feel that invitational education has many possibilities and many challenges to face. The road to warranted educational success is not easy. It requires continual and developing reanalysis. I hope invitational educators are willing to take the time and the effort.

Thus, Donald Schon and Abraham Edel provide an imaginative critique of invitational theory. Where might we go from here?

Imagining Research And Practice

Imagine the serious and systematic study of invitational education by researchers who meet regularly to brainstorm, discuss, and critique the latest developments in invitational education. What might they do? Let me sketch one possibility.

Imagine a meeting where some invitational researchers discuss the reports of Schon and Edel. They acknowledge that Schon assisted in getting the group to focus on the intricacies of the inviting process and Edel pointed out the necessity to connect with important and urgent social issues. There is some confusion and frustration about what to do next. After considerable discussion the group comes to the following conclusions: (1) that everything about invitational education cannot be studied in minute detail, there will always be more to study; (2) that the

theory will always need re-analysis and refinement; and (3) that these researchers do more than talk to each other; they would like to be of assistance to practitioners. An unusual silence pervades the group. There is the feeling that they are back at square one.

Suddenly someone in the group says, "I know how we could do focused, interesting, and useful research. What if (those imaginary words are heard again) we constructed a research program around the study and development of invitational artistry in education?" After much discussion and collaboration the group makes the ideas more coherent and eventually develops a metaphor, model, and method for this research project. What follows is a brief summary of this research program.

A Musical Metaphor

Imagine that we were seriously interested in the study and development of invitational artistry in education. How, would we go about doing this? We could begin with a precise definition of what we were looking for and proceed from there. The major difficulty however is that we only have a rough approximation of what we are seeking, so we have to begin by just pointing in the general direction, and then examining what we find. Since Donald Schon has pointed out that there are three possible ways of looking at the inviting process, we might decide which one, or combination thereof, to begin with. It seems to me that the richest idea of inviting is that which involves an ethical transaction between, with, and for people where something of worth is shared and extended. What is emphasized here is the mutuality that is lacking in the sales skills and performance metaphors. Perhaps from this perspective inviting is similar to fine jazz as opposed to "bad jazz." For jazz, like inviting, may involve good individual performances and interactive skills, but these are secondary to the purpose of playing together and extending mutually developed themes. It seems to me that the inviting process, like fine jazz, centers around sharing, respect, and creativity. Metaphorically, it is built on the intention of us making music together.

If we can accept this jazz band metaphor, then we have the task of locating exemplars of this artistry in educational practice. This might be done by providing a general description of the characteristics we seek and finding people who display these characteristics consistently and creatively in pursuing democratic goals.

Towards A Model

Imagine that we have identified people who are perceived to be artfully inviting in pursuit of important ends. What do we do?

Imagine we have developed our notion of inviting around the jazz band metaphor. We next need to develop a research model. When we use the invitational model provided by Purkey & Schmidt (1987) we find that it provides a wide lens focus (Novak, 1986), but it does not enable us to get to the particular problem of practice and issues people actually face as they try to invite educative events (Novak, 1984). The invitational model, although useful for expository purposes, can lead to a premature "hardening of the categories" when applied to complex situations. The actual experiences may not fit these categories.

Building on Schon's (1987) and Edel's (1985) works, we should seek a model based on the lived experiences of democratic educators as they try to invite and sustain educative events in difficult situations. In other words, what knowledge and reflective processes do invitational educators manifest as they try to cultivate a more global perspective or expand equality or deepen democratization, or work on any of the other themes mentioned by Edel? Our model, in attempting to validate and extend a democratically inviting theory of practice, will focus on the actual knowledge-in-use, reflective processes, successes and difficulties of those educators working in difficult situations. It is often in difficult situations, where goals and methods are not rigidly prescribed, that artistry flourishes.

Towards a Synthesis

What if we attempted to separate theory, research and practice in the pursuit of invitational artistry in education? We would have one group, theoreticians, interested in trying to understand and organize the basic inviting concepts and their relationships. Another group, researchers, would try to classify and study the empirical patterns that develop as the inviting approach is applied. A third group, practitioners, would put into concrete terms the recommendations of the other two. This is not the model developed in the previous section nor is it good jazz. Imagine instead we were seeking widespread intelligence, care, and initiative in invitational education. We then might say that every person should be simultaneously his or her own theoretician, researcher, and practitioner. Rather than separating these functions, each would be seen as necessary parts of an organic whole: research is based on practice, which is based on theory which requires research, and the circle expands. What we would have would be a large cadre of invitational educators all seeking to understand, extend, and validate invitational theory through their own research and practice. When this group of theoretically inclined researching-practitioners were together they would have the

common purpose of communicating about their experiences and the sense they have made of them. Thus, they would have the basis for and a desire to continue a thorough and reciprocal professional community. The theory then, could go beyond the basics, the research into the subtleties, and the practice into the most difficult problems. Just imagine what might happen then.

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