

The Manifestation of Invitational Theory in Inviting Schools

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Schools can be described in many different ways and by many different actions. "They are places where people work, people play, where people make friends, people get hurt or annoyed, where people are forced to go, people love to go, where people waste their time, and where people learn" (Gaffney, 1991, p. 12). Schools can also be regarded as places where people are invited to learn and to realize their relatively boundless potential (Purkey & Novak, 1984). To achieve this aim, it is important that an atmosphere conducive to learning and development be created in schools.

Every year many schools around the world and especially in the United States of America are awarded the Inviting School Award by the International Alliance for Invitational Education. Schools that receive this award distinguish themselves by practicing the assumptions of invitational theory. They complete questionnaires and submit other documentation to illustrate how they have incorporated the beliefs of invitational theory into educational practice.

This article summarizes visitations, observations, and interviews performed at eleven schools that were awarded the Inviting School Award in the U. S. The author performed this field research to determine ways that these schools incorporate an invitational philosophy. In particular, this study examines how two assumptions of invitational theory manifest themselves in these eleven schools. These two assumptions are: (1) People are able, valuable and responsible and should be treated accordingly; and (2) Education is a collaborative, cooperative relationship. To illustrate how these assumptions are manifested, this field study focuses on some mottoes of these schools, and, more specifically, to the variety of different ways these schools have implemented invitational theory in practice.

Methods

A list of schools in the U. S. A. that have received the Inviting School Award was obtained from the International Alliance for Invitational Education. None of these schools were familiar to the researcher. Ten schools were selected based on their availability (some schools were enjoying spring vacation during my visit to the United States), their location (they had to fit a feasible itinerary during a limited stay in the states), and type of schools available (rural and urban schools, and schools with different grade levels were included in the study). An eleventh school was included when an official invitation to visit was extended to the author.

Of the eleven schools finally selected for this field study two were high schools (grades 9-12), five were elementary schools (kindergarten through fourth or fifth grade), and four were elementary/middle schools (kindergarten through eighth grade). The schools were located in two states, New York and North Carolina. The eleven visits took place during the month of April in 1992.

An open-ended questionnaire was sent to the principal of each school before the visits. This procedure of sending the questionnaire beforehand gave the researcher ample time during the visit for an in-depth interview with the principal or other administrator, and allowed enough time for observation at each school site. Various documents, including student handbooks, parent brochures, letters to parents, staff development programs, appraisal form for staff members, and examples of rewards to students, formed part of the data collection process. Photographs were also taken at each school.

Ten days of approximately five hours per day were spent visiting each school, with the exception of one day when two schools were visited. Eleven administrators and eleven staff members designated by the principals were interviewed at the schools. Impromptu discussions with other staff members also took place at each of the schools. Each principal was asked to identify the motto of the school, and to provide one characteristic that best highlighted the nature of the school.

Findings

Mottoes

During the interviews with the administrators it became evident that the mottoes of these schools implicitly reveal the inviting posture and atmosphere that each school strives to attain. Many of these mottoes acknowledge and promote the importance of students and their ability to learn. The mottoes of one school for example stated that "All children can learn and are loved." At another school, an administrator

emphasized that "We want every child to learn and succeed in school. We will not quit until all children succeed." One of the high schools noted that its staff is trying to overcome the distance between the "haves" and the "have nots" by "making the school inviting and meaningful to all." This staff also reflected the belief that their school is a place "where every student can succeed."

The caring aspect of these mottoes is also apparent. Phrases such as "caring concern" and "learning is fun" illustrate an important belief of these schools. One staff member commented that "The school is here for the child, and every effort is made to promote academic learning and self-esteem." Repeatedly in these interviews it was noted how the mottoes of these different schools all set a similar stage on which to embrace the beliefs of invitational theory.

People Are Able, Valuable and Responsible and Should Be Treated Accordingly

Educators' personal and professional behavior, among themselves and with others, reflects whether or not they accept this assumption (Purkey & Novak, 1984). From the questionnaires, observations and interviews in this study, this author found that these eleven schools adhere to this principle. For all these schools the ability, value and responsibility of students are paramount to a healthy learning environment. One administrator summed up the situation this way: "All students are considered able to learn and every effort is made to assist them through regular instruction, recourse classes, and tutorial programs. Each student's contribution to learning and to the total community is considered valuable. Students are encouraged to make appropriate choices and responsible decisions."

Inviting schools strive to respect every student for his or her individual self-worth, and therefore recognize the individuality of each student. This recognition has certain implications for the student. In this regard one interviewee in an elementary school commented, "Attempts are made to teach children that they are accountable to themselves for their decisions."

One school formulated a "Student Bill of Rights," including seven aspects that acknowledge, value and respect the uniqueness of the student. Two examples are: (1) The student shall be treated with respect and shall be encouraged to treat others with respect, and (2) The student shall be given an opportunity to be heard in his or her own behalf before any disciplinary action is taken by the school staff.

Students who have distinguished themselves academically and in other endeavors, or who have shown improvement in areas such as behavior and attendance are honored for their performance. One school displayed exceptional performances and improvements on a special bulletin board in a showcase.

Another posted the "Citizen of the Week" for each class, and a third school used quarterly certificates and television announcements for all "good citizens" to acknowledge their achievements and accomplishments. One of the schools awarded the efforts of teachers by electing the "Teacher of the Year" whose photograph was displayed in the foyer of the school.

All the schools visited in this study value the contributions of students in various areas of decision making. Some schools provide students with opportunities to participate and contribute to school improvement, thereby acknowledging their ability to help create a learning environment conducive to learning. For example, two schools have surveyed students, parents, and staff members and asked them to identify areas of needed improvement.

Although the eleven schools revealed many similarities in how they incorporated this assumption into their school philosophies and practices, some unique strategies are highlighted here. In one elementary school, the principal acknowledged the importance of students by saying that they "are not empty vessels; we can learn from them." The following examples illustrate this stance:

- Giving students the opportunity to plan their own cafeteria menus
- Asking applicants for teaching positions to present lessons to students in class and using students' opinions in the final decision to recommend a suitable candidate
- Allowing students to offer suggestions for school improvement by writing letters to the school principal

All the above examples and many others gathered by this researcher indicate that the assumption of valuing students' ability and responsibility manifests itself in the practices of inviting schools.

Education Is a Collaborative, Cooperative Relationship

Purkey and Novak (1988) stressed the importance of involving people in the education process. Furthermore, they observed the moral and ethical issues involved in doing things with people as opposed to doing things to people. People are surely entitled to a voice in their own destiny.

According to this assumption, there are sound reasons for including the person involved in the education process. One of the schools in this study embraces a motto that begins, "Together we can...," an indication of the importance of involving many people in educational decisions. One administrator commented that if "we all work together we can produce good results" because "success in school is a result of cooperative planning and sharing of responsibilities." Successful education depends on the contribution of many people. The parents of students, parent organizations, peers, other staff members, and the community all

have important contributions to make. The involvement of all these parties illustrates that education is a collaborative, cooperative relationship.

The eleven schools in this study used a variety of practices to demonstrate their adherence to the assumption that education is a collaborative effort. These practices focused on the roles of the school principal, faculty, students and their peers, parents, and the community.

The Principal's Role

The principal has a vital role in the collaborative process. Interviews found that the principal acts as "facilitator and booster" and is responsible for setting the "climate in the school." In sum, the principal fulfills an indispensable role in creating an inviting atmosphere in the school.

The data gathered in these visits indicate that inviting schools place high value on the visibility and availability of their principals. Swymer's (1986) observation that "The time has come for American school principals to leave their offices and address the major stumbling blocks to the success of American schools—school tone and atmosphere" (p. 91) is reflected in these inviting schools. Many principals and their assistant principals were observed outside school buildings welcoming students, staff and parents on their arrival in the morning. This strategy has the dual purpose of ensuring the safety of others and at the same time establishing strong personal relationships. One principal reported that the bus driver is the first person to meet a child on the way to school and "I want to be the next." By establishing this type of posture, principals and other administrators are able to feel the "pulse of the school" and prevent difficult situations from inhibiting the educational mission of the school.

In the schools in this study, the principals were also regular visitors to classrooms. One Principal emphasized this visibility by commenting that "classroom visits are made daily." In this study, principals were observed receiving the smiles of students and staff members, and in the case of one elementary principal the hugs of several second graders. At no time was an uneasiness observed on the part of students or staff members towards these administrators. When visits to classes were made, teachers and students usually continued with their work as if no interruption had occurred.

Principals' regular visits to classes keep them informed about educational activities. During the visit, the author observed that principals knew exactly which teachers were responsible for what type of lesson, for which grade level,

and during what period of the day. Some of them were able to mention these details from memory without having to consult a school schedule. Surely this is the hallmark of an administrator who collaborates and cooperates with the school staff.

The Staff's Role

Collegiality and professional development are two important characteristics of inviting schools that reflect a spirit of collaboration and cooperation. In this study, each school created and implemented strategies and programs to foster collegiality and development. For example, in one elementary school, a program called "Peer Coaches" met monthly and teachers as coaches provided support for their colleagues. Also in this school, staff development is viewed as a collaborative effort to focus on essential knowledge and skills. According to one interviewee, "These programs have emerged because teachers have been supported and encouraged to try new programs, take risks, and use their strengths to teachers others."

One of the high schools had an "Incentive Committee," consisting of volunteer teachers who create, develop, and organize various activities and programs in the school to support their colleagues. Usually, teachers are isolated in classrooms and do not have much interaction with friends and cohorts. Through the Incentive Committee, teachers become the facilitators of change charged with enhancing the total learning environment of the school.

In another program, the "Teacher/Buddy System," every teacher in the school has adopted a student "Buddy," who may be at risk of dropping out of school. This Buddy System encourages relationships that go beyond the school campus. For example, a teacher calls when a student is absent from school and provides support and encouragement in a variety of ways.

The Parents' Role

Data from this study indicate that all the schools value parental participation in assuring the education of their children. The role of individual parents in the education of their children, as well as group activities for parents, is advocated by all these schools. One school noted the increase in parental involvement since receiving the Inviting School Award.

Two schools use folders to inform students and parents of programs, services and policies. Other schools provide parents with handbooks containing necessary information. This information includes important programs, services, and

policies, as well as information about parenting strategies and the importance of helpful home-school relations.

Some of the inviting schools are actively involved in recruiting parent volunteers. For example, one school provides a detailed volunteer handbook. A variety of projects in these schools are coordinated by parents. These include cultural arts activities, reading enrichment programs, and tutoring services. Parents also participate in decision making committees such as those responsible for cafeteria and nutrition, school rules, cultural programs, curriculum matters, and health and safety. At one school, the psychologist trained a Parent Support Group as an outreach team of parents to help and assist other families.

Inviting schools believe that it is important to help parents develop effective parenting skills. Many of the schools in this study held parent awareness meetings and workshops on a variety of timely topics. At one school, these programs are coordinated by a local pediatrician and his staff. Another school had a display cabinet that contains materials for parents. These materials cover a variety of topics about parenthood and home-school relations. This school also has a special bulletin board with copies of selected articles, which are available free to parents.

The findings of this study show that inviting schools strive to create an environment where parents feel welcome and are encouraged to participate. These schools acknowledge the vital importance of parental participation in school and the valuable contribution they make to a child's learning at home and school.

The Community's Role

As with the other elements that illustrate collaboration and cooperation, the community has the potential to make a valuable contribution to the educational process. The inviting schools in this study recognize this potential and create procedures and programs that include community participation. In many of the reading classes in the elementary schools, people from retirement centers volunteer as helpers and tutors. These retirees have the time and patience to share with children, which in turn makes their lives more meaningful. Some of these older citizens become substitute "grannies" for the school children. For example in one elementary school an association of retired citizens adopts children who need extra attention, and members bring children's gifts on holidays, birthdays and other special occasions.

The inviting schools in this study rely on the active involvement of the community. Some examples of ways in which these schools involve community groups and agencies include:

- A trainer from a county Drug Free Association who leads classes in special "rap" sessions to keep the school drug free.
- Varsity athletes against drug abuse conduct class meetings and assemblies.
- Guests from local agencies and businesses share information with students. For example, a chemical company, a poison control center, the police department, an alcohol prevention program, and the fire department all presented programs in one school during the year.

A school is part of a community, and every community is a reflection of the schools in it. Data from this field study supported the belief that close cooperation between the schools and the community is essential in inviting schools.

The Students' Role

Inviting schools value the cooperation and collaboration of students, both individually and in groups. Although the role of principals, teachers, parents, and community is important, the role of students in helping students cannot be overlooked.

Students' contributions in inviting schools take many forms. For example, making use of "Big Brothers," "Peer Helpers," and "Peer Pals" programs is a popular practice found in many of these schools. Students are trained in helping new students, tutoring others, and lending an empathic ear when classmates are in need. Students usually feel more comfortable when talking to peers about less serious problems. These helping relationships benefit both the peer helper and the student. They also establish a referral network for school counselors. Peer helpers offer the first line of assistance and encourage their classmates to seek additional help from the school counselor.

All the facets of cooperation and collaboration described above pull together in creating beneficial school environments. Each of these elements of the school community is a valued partner in the total program. As such, education is a cooperative venture that capitalizes on the potential of everyone and every institution to help children learn. This study found that administrators, teachers, parents, students, and the community all share a vital role in an inviting school.

Conclusion

This article highlights a few findings from a field study of eleven schools awarded the Inviting School Award. Specifically, the findings describe programs and practices established by these schools to address two assumptions of invitational theory. Through questionnaires, interviews, and observations this study found that inviting schools are successful in creating environments where

people, especially students, are welcomed and invited to realize their boundless potential. In these schools the beliefs that people are able, valuable and responsible, and that education is most effective as a cooperative relationship, are paramount to their mission.

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