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Book Review: Developing Inviting Schools

Sean Schat
sschat@redeemer.ca

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Purkey, W.W., Novak, J.M., Fretz, J.R. (2020). *Developing inviting schools: A beneficial framework for teaching and leading*. Teachers College Press. 208 pages. ISBN: 978-0807764725.

Sean Schat, Redeemer University

Schools that are *educationally excellent* should be hospitable places, communities that invite engagement and participation and support the growth, wellbeing, and flourishing of all community members. Schools that are *Biblically faithful* should also be vibrant organizations characterized by hospitality, inviting community members to engage and flourish. Such schools should equip community members to BE hospitable, and to support the wellbeing and flourishing of others. Their students should carry this vision and impact beyond the walls of the building.

What is Invitational Education?

Invitational Theory, introduced by William Purkey in 1978, is a theory of practice that equips organizations to become inviting communities, and to assess the extent to which they are inviting. *Invitational Education* is the direct application of this theoretical foundation to the school setting, which has been the focus of the authors for over forty years (e.g., Purkey, 1978; Purkey & Novak, 1984; Purkey & Novak, 1996; Novak & Purkey, 2001; Purkey & Novak, 2015). Every year, the International Association of Invitational Education (IAIE) grants several *Inviting School Awards*, acknowledging and celebrating schools that have been recognized as inviting communities. Invitational theory has also been applied in other contexts, including counseling (Purkey & Schmidt, 1996) and leadership (Novak et al., 2014; Purkey & Siegel, 2003).

The inviting approach could be a powerful resource for Christian educators and Christian school communities, providing tools for

developing hospitable, flourishing communities. Such communities can provide a fertile foundation for equipping students to become hospitable people who authentically seek the wellbeing and flourishing of others. These students could have a Kingdom-building impact beyond their schooling.

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Developing Inviting Schools: A Beneficial Framework for Teaching and Leading (Purkey et al., 2020) is the most recent iteration of the authors' collective work. In addition to introducing theoretical foundations and practical resources, the authors make a strong case for the timeliness of the approach, linking their theory to current educational issues and topics, particularly focusing on safety, inclusion, and belonging. Although the theory itself is not new, its potential value and impact is timely and relevant for schools and communities across the globe.

Developing Inviting Schools is a rich and comprehensive overview of the theory and its application in education, providing a very effective summary of the approach, including important concepts, resources, and examples. The first six

Sean Schat is Assistant Professor of Education at Redeemer University

chapters introduce the audience to the foundations of the theory, while chapter 7 provides guidance for schools seeking to enact the theory, and chapter 8 shares the stories of schools and communities that have already done so. This book is an excellent place for a new and interested reader to begin their Inviting journey.

What is an Invitation?

Invitational theory is rooted in the Latin word, *Invitare*, which means “to summon cordially, not to shun”. The authors noted, “This book is based on the position that the primary mission of schools is to summon individuals cordially and ethically to realize their relatively untapped potential in all worthwhile areas of human endeavour” (p. 1). The authors identified five key **domains** that characterize an invitational community, described as the 5 Ps: *people, places, policies, programs, and processes*. Being inviting is an ongoing and intentional communal process. Everyone is involved. And everyone is invited.

The Power of Perceptions

The theory builds on the work of Art Combs, who developed perceptual theory (Combs et al., 1976), then focused research on the perceptions of effective helpers (Combs et al., 1969; Combs et al., 1978; Combs & Gonzalez, 1993), people who work in the helping professions, such as teachers, counselors, psychologists, nurses, social workers, and doctors. Effective helpers are not distinguished from ineffective helpers on the basis of their knowledge or methods. Instead, what separates an effective helper from an ineffective helper is their *perceptions*: the way they look at what they do, which then shapes their behaviour. Specifically, Purkey et al., (2020) noted that effective teachers can be distinguished, “on the basis of their perceptions of people as able rather than unable, friendly rather than unfriendly, worthy rather than unworthy, dependable rather than undependable, helpful rather than hindering, and internally rather than externally focused” (p. 47).

Whether or not a behaviour is inviting or disinviting is a perceptual issue: it is in the eye of the beholder. Teachers can’t simply wish to be inviting. Their intentions must be enacted:

invitations need to be sent, and they need to be received. The authors describe the importance of the teacher’s inviting “stance” or disposition. At the heart of invitational theory are two sets of concepts, the five **elements** and the four **levels**. The five elements describe characteristics of inviting people, who are characterized by *care, trust, respect, optimism, and intentionality*. The four levels heighten the focus on intentionality, recognizing that students can experience a range of inviting and disinviting behaviours in school. The authors have developed a continuum, describing teacher behaviours as *intentionally disinviting, unintentionally disinviting, unintentionally inviting, and intentionally inviting*. A teacher with an inviting stance is recognized for consistency and intentionality in demonstrating inviting behaviours. A community that is collectively committed to these ideals makes a difference. As the authors noted, “Teacher stance represents the disposition of all school adults regarding trust, respect, optimism, and intentionality. These qualities are essential ingredients in creating and maintaining a socially and emotionally safe climate for everyone in schools” (p. 68).

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The authors highlighted the importance of student perceptions, which ultimately define whether or not a student believes they have received an invitation. While this distinction is itself noteworthy (e.g., teacher intentions and actions are necessary and difference-making, but are insufficient for communicating an invitation, which must be received and responded to by the student), the authors also identify a pivotal student perception, which they define as “self-concept-as-learner” (p. 120).

Purkey et al. (2020) introduced what they described as the four **dimensions**, highlighting the importance of being *personally* and *professionally* inviting with both *self* and *others*. This has important implications for teachers, of course, who need to be personally and professionally inviting with themselves, as well as with their students. But it takes on additional power when focusing on the ways in which students can professionally and personally invite themselves to engage in their own growth and learning. As the authors pointed out, “Students’ perceptions of themselves as learners apparently serve as personal guidance systems to direct their classroom behaviour” (p. 120).

Invitations Can Transform

Building on an inviting stance to establish an inviting community has the potential to position students to truly and authentically invite themselves to engage in both the learning and the community-building processes. These behaviours, rooted in pivotal perceptions, have the potential to be transformational.

I encourage Christian educators and educational leaders to explore invitational theory. The theory provides an exciting foundation for establishing communities defined by hospitality and belonging, and for equipping students to themselves be community builders. Invitational theory is a well-established resource for helping schools, school leaders, and school stakeholders to develop inviting communities. Christian educational institutions should be among the most inviting places in town.

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