

**Title:** Invitational Learning: Creating Classrooms with Enthusiasm

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**Bios:** Dr. Michele Kane is Associate Professor and Coordinator of the Master of Arts in Gifted Education program at Northeastern Illinois University in Chicago. She currently serves as President of the Illinois Association for Gifted Children and has been extensively involved in leadership positions with several networks of the National Association for Gifted Children (NAGC), including chairing the Global Awareness Network. She was a Program Coordinator for Gifted for nearly 15 years, is a regular presenter at state, national, and international conferences, and is a published author.

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***Abstract:*** Invitational Learning: Classrooms with Enthusiasm

Learning thrives where there is enthusiasm in the classroom. Invitational Learning provides a model that helps students demonstrate academic growth and teachers find real joy in teaching. The Invitational Learning model, developed by William Purkey more than twenty years ago, provides an alternative lens to view educational practices and bring enthusiasm to teaching and learning, creating opportunities to experience real joy in school and in the classroom. Key assumptions of Purkey's theory of Invitational Learning include respect, trust, optimism and intentionality. Other aspects of the theory include how people, places, policies, programs and processes (5 P's) play a role in individual successes or failures. These can be effectively combined with additional strategies and resources to guide educators who wish to implement this model.

### Invitational Learning: Creating Classrooms with Enthusiasm

The voice on the other end of the phone was fraught with anxiety. “I just don’t know what to do about second grade,” Joey’s mother sounded frantic. “We went out for an end of the year luncheon to celebrate the first full year of school and when I asked Joey about the highlights of the school year he became uncharacteristically silent. Later during the meal Joey looked at me with big eyes and said, ‘Being in school was like chewing gum and chewing gun and chewing gum and waiting for the flavor to come—but it never did!’”

In many school districts across the United States there seems to be a pervasive sense that the primary focus of education is for learners to demonstrate their achievements. The emphasis is on what a child can do and not who the child is becoming. The excitement that comes from discovering a new concept or grasping an idea that seems out of reach may be a rare occurrence. The Invitational Learning model, developed by William Purkey more than twenty years ago, provides an alternative lens to view educational practices and to bring enthusiasm to teaching and learning, thereby creating opportunities to experience real joy in school and in the classroom.

As Annemarie Roeper (2009) said, “Every school is a living organism with a soul of its own” (personal communication). Furthermore, as Ellis (1990) indicated, “Schools, like individuals, have ‘personalities’; these self-validating and self-reinforcing characteristics do much to shape students’ experience of school and their attitudes toward learning” (p. 1). However, so much of what has been going on in schools lately has ignored the personality and the soul of

each of our schools and taken the joy out of teaching and learning for educators and students alike. Now is the time to build bridges back from tedium to enthusiasm.

Three basic premises form the foundations of Invitational Learning, as described by Purkey (1984):

- Behavior is based on perception.
- Perceptions are learned.
- Perceptions can be reflected upon.

Purkey's approach also rests firmly on self-concept theory and is inextricably intertwined with perceptual theory. Developed by Donald Snygg and Arthur Combs, the core of perceptual theory is that the way people view themselves influences the way they behave. Specifically, the maintenance, protection, and enhancement of perceived self is the motive behind all human behavior. This includes self-concept development, self-concept as a guidance system, and the significance of positive self-regard (Combs & Snygg, 1959).

According to Purkey and Novak (1966, pp. 50-55) the key assumptions of Invitational Learning are as follows:

1. **Respect.** People are able, valuable, and responsible and should be treated accordingly.
2. **Trust.** Education should be a cooperative, collaborative activity where process is as important as product.

3. **Optimism.** People possess untapped potential in all worthwhile human endeavors.
4. **Intentionality.** Human potential can be realized by creating and maintaining places, policies, processes and programs specifically designed to invite development, and by people who are intentionally inviting with themselves and others.

The idea behind an “inviting approach” is that teacher characteristics (attitude, encouragements, attention, expectations, evaluations) increase the probability of student learning. In other words, teachers’ characteristics influence students’ perceptions of themselves and thereby permeate everything that happens in school. When teachers are able to be fully present and listen deeply to the needs of students then they are better able to respond in a way that enhances the ability of the student to see himself as capable within that environment.

Invitational learning is based on the following beliefs:

1. Each person wants to be accepted and affirmed as valuable, capable and responsible, and wants to be treated accordingly.
2. Every person – students, parents, teachers, administrators, counselors, and others – has the power to create beneficial messages to send to themselves and others, and because they have this power, they also have the responsibility.
3. Each person has untapped potential in all areas of human endeavor.

4. Student potential can best be realized in schools where programs, policies, and processes are intentionally designed to invite optimal development, and where people consistently seek to realize this potential in themselves and others.

Purkey's model provides a framework that describes for student teachers, PreK-12 teachers, and teacher educators how to create an invitational environment that enhances self-concept and self-understanding and develops enthusiasm and joy in school and in the classroom. Invitational learning fosters the conditions that present opportunities for academic as well as affective growth. The emphasis is on effort rather than achievement. Learning is paramount and performance is not the focus.

“Invitational Education” is a trademarked name for an emerging model for schools and other human services organizations that are committed to invitational learning. People who embrace this model emphasize five “value-based assumptions”: trust, respect, care, optimism, and intentionality.

With regard to trust, the collaboration and trust between the teacher and students become the basis for students first believing and then confirming their ability to be successful learners. In terms of respect, people are seen as able, valuable, and responsible and should be treated accordingly. Care is reflected by a genuine ability and desire to be concerned with people, their growth, and their accomplishments. With optimism, people are believed to possess goodness and have a desire to convey it and will correct the mistakes that are made.

At the heart of Purkey's model is the concept of intentionality. This is particularly relevant for teachers at all grade levels to help them be aware of how their attitudes and behaviors affect the classroom experience for themselves and their students.

Four levels of functioning are encompassed in intentionality, ranging from "Intentionally Disinviting" to "Intentionally Inviting", with "Unintentional Behaviors" in between.

Insert Figure 1 about here

**Intentionally Disinviting.** This type of behavior is purposefully harmful. The students, parents, teachers, or others who are intentionally disinviting are conscious of what they are doing. They send messages that describe people as irresponsible, incapable and worthless. They demean, degrade and destroy the value and worth of themselves and others.

It is essential that teachers examine their personal biases and prejudices so that these feelings are not communicated within the classroom. If a teacher is unable to overcome a particular preconceived notion regarding a child or group of children then those individuals could easily become stigmatized. Nonverbal communication can be just as powerful in stigmatization as more overt communications.

**Unintentionally Disinviting.** At this level of functioning, harmful messages occur even when people do not intend them. Basically, this is careless and thoughtless behavior – behavior that is ill-timed, poorly planned, and/or

misguided. The result is messages that may be misinterpreted, gestures that may be viewed as offensive and actions that may be misunderstood.

School personnel must be aware of the sensitivities and intensities associated with each child. For one child a sarcastic tone might be perceived as playful and humorous while another student may perceive the same remark as biting and caustic. Often teachers are surprised at how a particular situation or environment may hinder learning; yet, a bit of investigation might provide insight into why particular students are ill at ease or uncomfortable. Profiling students based on race, gender, or religion can lead to behavioral expectations that are insensitive or inconsiderate.

**Unintentionally Inviting.** Even though students, parents, teachers or counselors are uncertain about what they did to achieve them, these unintentionally inviting actions have positive results. Beneficial relationships become more possible, based on good intentions, even without having a clear purpose or direction. Unintentionally inviting behaviors often occur randomly and may only appear as a fluke with no apparent connection between behaviors and perceptions. The lack of consistency may prevent successful relationships from being repeated.

Typically, when a positive outcome is experienced there is an understanding as to why this situation occurred. For teachers, it is essential to be vigilant regarding this seemingly affirmative and upbeat attitude without an apparent reason. When encouragement is accidental and supportive then it can



be confusing to a learner who may jump to an incorrect conclusion regarding the nature of the teacher's actions.

**Intentionally Inviting.** At this, the highest level of professional functioning, professional skills are consistently demonstrated. Those who are intentionally inviting have a broad knowledge base and unconditional regard for themselves and others. Beneficial messages are created that enable others to feel valued and worthwhile and thereby encourage optimal human development by becoming the foundation for a healthy, well-functioning self-concept.

Human potential can be realized by creating and maintaining places, policies, processes and programs, specifically designed to invite development. People, places, policies, programs & processes (Purkey's 5 P's) each play a role in individual student successes or failures. Each of these needs to be considered to create a learning environment that fosters an eagerness and zest for new experiences. Practical strategies within each of these categories can help to guide educators who wish to implement invitational learning.

### **People**

Invitational people value learners for who they are and not just what they can do. They help other adults understand the needs of all students, including those who are gifted (including gifted underachievers), those who have other special educational needs, and those who come from racially, culturally, linguistically, and economically diverse backgrounds. Invitational people advocate for students and provide opportunities for them to understand more about themselves and their abilities. Furthermore, invitational people can

encourage youngsters to become self-advocates. They can determine students' interests and match learning experiences to those interests. They can connect gifted learners with appropriate mentors, and they can foster classroom relationships so each of the students feel included, not isolated.

### **Places**

Spots for quiet reading, quiet study, and chill spots can enhance an invitational learning environment for introverts, while conversation spots, dialogue corners, and pair-share places can be especially helpful for extroverts. Student choice regarding the display of work is a valuable component of an invitational learning environment. Green plants and other connections to things that are alive provide a positive contribution to creating an invitational classroom, as do quotes and posters that provide ideas for self-reflection, materials for self-exploration and creative expression, and fidget materials to help students who need them to focus. Integral to maintaining a warm atmosphere is a consideration of the use of color as well as attention to aesthetics regarding placement of furniture.

### **Policies**

An important policy to establish in order to create invitational learning environments is to commit to a growth model that supports learning for all and to moving at a pace congruent with learner abilities. Policies should allow for learners of similar interests, ability, and motivation to learn together. Opportunities for students involved in school governance should be encouraged.

Gifted learners should be encouraged to become self-advocates and to be responsible for individual learning.

### **Programs**

Programs that encourage collaboration rather than competition can be established as a part of a commitment to invitational learning (e.g. Problem Based Learning, Future Problem Solving, and other collaborative team efforts). Mentoring programs can be created both for and by learners, along with opportunities for students to pursue learning in their individual areas of passion and skills in their individual areas of talent. Additionally, programs that seek to be inclusive with regard to membership may foster a sense of belonging to the school community.

### **Processes**

In terms of processes, invitational learning models a caring attitude and understanding of the issues faced by youngsters. Empathy is displayed towards the concerns specific to various kinds of learners, ranging from those who are struggling to those who are gifted. A classroom atmosphere of positive regard is established for all, including those who differ from the general population in any way. In an invitational learning environment, teachers advocate on behalf of meeting individual students' needs with other adults so that they have a level of awareness and understanding.

### Contemporary Initiatives

While Invitational Education has a history dating back several decades there are many contemporary educational initiatives that might benefit from this conceptual framework or from implementing various aspects of this approach.

*Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports* is a problem-solving collaborative approach to encouraging appropriate behaviors in schools through consistent expectations delivered by all members within the school community.

This companion to the RtI model provides a means of addressing behavioral issues of learners. Purkey's framework sets the stage for an inviting milieu that would enhance the PBIS model. Similarly, many states have introduced *Social and Emotional Learning Standards* in addition to specific content standards.

Invitational learning easily supports these standards and offers a vehicle for implementing some of these standards. Another topical area of concern is the issue of bullying. *Safe Schools/Healthy Students* is a federal initiative that promotes safety at school with a focus on violence prevention. The Invitational Learning model can be used to create the dynamic atmosphere that fosters community building with an emphasis on trust and respect. This method can be used to either supplement or supplant current initiatives that have an affective component at the core.

### Conclusion

The learning environment has a significant impact on school performance and the social-emotional adjustment of all students. Creating an invitational

learning environment is one of the factors in a student's life over which educators do have some control, if they are willing to exercise it. (Fiedler, 1993)

In reflecting on how Purkey's theory of Invitational Learning relates to best practice for classroom teachers at all grade levels, teacher educators can ask their students to consider the following:

- Think about a time when learning was joyful for you.
- Who were the people who were involved?
- Picture the place in your mind's eye. How did you feel being there?
- Were there any policies that allowed for the learning to occur?
- What type of program contributed to your sense of well-being?
- What processes enhanced the experience and made it joyful and filled you with enthusiasm?

These questions can serve as a guide in moving forward consistently and consciously to create invitational educational environments that honor the heart and soul of everyone in school and bring enthusiasm back to learning.

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Figure 1

Source: Schmidt (1997), p. 12.

