

From Theory to Praxis Applying Invitational Education Beyond Schools

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Abstract

This essay critically reviews the application of Invitational Education (IE)¹ beyond classrooms and schools by examining the activities of an educational volunteer program (The Atherton Gardens Homework Support Program). The authors advocate that in order to have a meaningful effect, IE needs to be implemented along with principles of other pedagogical approaches such as cognitive, social, and behavioural, and to take into serious consideration the social and political context in which it is applied.

Introduction

In William Purkey and John Novak's *Fundamentals of Invitational Education* (2008), the reader is invited to imagine an exemplary institution where:

- ...parents call the school, the phone is answered promptly and professionally by a friendly human voice . . . (p. 1);
- ...the students have contributed over 2000 volunteer hours to community service; student work [is] displayed everywhere . . . (p. 1); and
- ...the school corridors [have] living green plants, colourful bright paint, fresh smells, and shining floors (p. 3).

The description of this imaginary school concludes that, "as the family settles in their new home, there is a wonderful feeling regarding the new school" (Purkey & Novak, 2008, p. 7). Reading these descriptions, one cannot help but recall the images of propaganda in the Soviet Union. In a number of such propaganda, an 'inviting' Lenin is smiling and showing children the path to a 'bright' new future.

This analogy points to a shortcoming in the formulation of the IE approach, which Peter McLaren captures in his criticism of IE. In 1986, McLaren, a radical theorist and active proponent of critical pedagogy, emphatically wrote in his review of *Inviting school success: A self-concept approach to teaching, learning, and democratic practice* by William Purkey and John Novak (1984):

The invitational approach to schooling can be read from a radical perspective as "Let's make the process of your domination and subjugation less painful. Let's dominate you in a humanistic fashion. We will put you in a basic level program, but treat you kindly all the same." Surely, nobody wants to go to school and be treated in an inhumane fashion. But

¹ The authors are using Invitational Education and not Invitational Theory, because, although attempts have been made to distinguish between the two (most recently, Shaw, Siegel, & Schoenlein, 2010), there is no difference between their content (see Purkey & Novak, 2008).

for teachers and administrators to stress kindness at the expense of addressing fundamental concerns related to how schools reproduce class inequalities is a cosmetic form of humanization, tantamount to putting Clearasil on cancer” (McLaren, 1986, p. 94).

Putting aside McLaren’s neo-Marxist rhetoric, the key question that needs to be addressed, while examining the application of the humanist approaches to education, and of IE in particular, is whether they are simply cosmetic fixtures that do not address fundamental problems in the educational system and society more broadly. If so, how can this be overcome? This question becomes more relevant if we accept, not only that educational approaches should be applicable beyond school, but also that teachers themselves should see their role as influencing the broader community.

To address these issues, the authors review the activity of an educational volunteer program – The Atherton Gardens Homework Support Program- AGHSP (Fitzroy, Victoria, Australia) and examine how the principles of IE are applied. While McLaren may describe this program as another mode of hegemonic domination, “the process by which the dominant culture/class/group maintains its dominance” (McLaren, 1988, p. 173), it will be shown that the AGHSP is far from being a program of dominance and subjugation, but rather an ‘inviting’ program.

However, before turning to this case study, we will first examine the main principles of IE and the main criticisms that it faces.

Invitational Education: A Critical Review

Invitational Education has its foundations in John Dewey’s (1916) “democratic ethos,” in the perceptual tradition, and self-concept theory. Its main ideas rest on: (1) the basic assumptions (optimism, trust, respect, care, intentionality); (2) the five P’s (people, places, policies, programs, processes);² (3) the ladder (intentionally disinviting, unintentionally disinviting, unintentionally inviting, intentionally inviting) and; (4) the four corner press (being personally inviting with oneself, being personally inviting with others, being professionally inviting with oneself, being professionally inviting with others) (Purkey & Novak, 2008).

Purkey considered that the purpose of IE is:

...to address the entire global nature of human existence and opportunity, and to make life a more exciting, satisfying, and enriching experience. Invitational theory is unlike any other system reported in the professional literature in that it provides an overarching framework for a variety of programs, policies, places, and processes that fit with its basic components (Purkey, 1992, p. 5).

The founders of IE believe that the theory can be adopted and implemented, not only in educational institutions, but also in health facilities, public offices and other settings (Shaw, Siegel, & Schoenlein, 2010).

Invitational Education is strongly based on humanist approaches to education (Purkey & Novak, 2008) and these approaches have been praised for recognising the human being’s uniqueness, underlining the importance of self-concept, developing methodologies that encourage group work, increasing the involvement of students in decision-making, and making schools more pleasant and inviting (Richards &

² ‘Politics’ was introduced by Dean Fink (1992) as the sixth ‘P’.

Combs, 1993, pp. 266–67). However, humanistic approaches have also been criticised for having a lack of structure that leads to weaker academic outcomes, for the unpreparedness of teachers to implement these approaches, due to their lack of training, and for the difficulty in measuring their impact (Duchesne, McMaugh, Bocher, & Krause, 2013, p. 260).

However, to deal with these identified shortcomings, educators need to look at the critiques beyond educational psychology. From a philosophical perspective, Nimrod Aloni (2002) argues that, at the beginning of the 21st century, humanistic education faced a crisis that derives from what he calls “ideological banality” and “ethical nihilism.” The ideological banality he sees, in the fact that the value of humanistic education is lost because, while there is enthusiastic support for it, educators most often are not capable of describing its core values and elements (Aloni, 2002, p. 2). Aloni argues that “the problem of banalization of humanistic education derives from the current combination of its high public ‘rating’ on the one hand, and the superficial and confused attitude towards its nature and implications on the other” (p. 3). Perhaps radically, he concludes that “humanistic education is a symbol which does not symbolize anything” (p. 3). Nihilism, Aloni says, is “manifested in a lack of interest in broadening and deepening our understanding of the essence of humanistic education beyond banality of its assortment of clichés” (p. 3).

Aloni’s criticism is mirrored in what educational sociologists have said about humanist education. Their main criticism is that it fails to recognise the relationship between society and the school as an educational institution. McLaren (1986), in his review of IE, argues that “the authors [*Inviting school success*] fail to situate their pedagogical concerns within a broader problematic, one that understands how classrooms can be truly humanized only when there exists greater social justice and economic equality in the larger society” (p. 91).

McLaren’s criticism should be contextualised: he wrote in a time when humanist approaches to education were under substantial challenge, for not providing a structured curriculum and for being too focused on the individual, rather than the system. In the 1970s and 1980s, social theorists of education, such as Henry Giroux, Michael Apple, and Pierre Bourdieu, argued that the schools were not isolated from the broader society; if anything, they perpetuated social disadvantage and inequality (Torres, 1999). While acknowledging that it is “perhaps unfair to criticize invitational education for what it is not – namely, a social theory,” McLaren (1986, p. 92) argues that those same radical theorists:

...have taught us that curriculum development, policy making, and teacher instruction do not exist in a pristine state uncontaminated by the contexts and juxtapositions of which they are necessarily a part. Any assertion that the pedagogical encounter between teacher and student is a politically or ideologically neutral event is therefore pure pomposity, amounting to nothing more than spurious, contrived chimera (p. 92).

With these criticisms in mind, the following case study is presented in order to analyse an instance of the practical application of IE.

Case Study: The Atherton Gardens Homework Support Program

The Atherton Gardens Homework Support Program (AGHSP) is extremely relevant and revealing in the application of IE. In particular, the AGHSP attempts to address the 5Ps in a collaborative and cooperative manner.

A partnership was formed with the Melbourne campus of the Australian Catholic University (ACU) Community Engagement Program, The Smith Family, and the local Vietnamese Mothers Group (VMG),

in response to community concern about how best to increase support for children's learning (*People*). The partnership's shared vision and collaborative approach provides a program designed to engage children from refugee and disadvantaged backgrounds, to increase social inclusion through education (*Program*).

The ACU's Community Engagement program is aimed at promoting justice and equity. It provides the capacity of all third-year, pre-service teachers from the Faculty of Education as tutors in the program. The Smith Family works within the community to facilitate partnerships and provides educational opportunities for disadvantaged families. The VMG is responsible for the logistical aspects of the Homework Support Program (*Policy*). They bring their own refugee experience and personal settlement knowledge to the partnership, and demonstrate a commitment to the local needs of refugee children and their families.

The program was initially run for Sacred Heart primary students. Due to the success of the program, it is now accessible to all primary school students in the Fitzroy area, and the rise in numbers has prompted an expansion to two venues (*Place*). Student enrolments have risen from an initial 18 students in 2002, to 132 students in 2010.

The AGHSP is mutually beneficial for all stakeholders. It actions ACU's mission of community engagement and provides the tutors with the opportunity to enhance their pre-service teaching experience. The VMG is a vital link in connecting and supporting families in the local social and learning networks (*Process*). The Smith Family provides 65 students with educational scholarships, while also offering literacy support programs for students and their parents. The school values its strong relationship with the partners, in providing a positive response to community capacity building.

The program is run for various ages, from primary school to high school. Each child, as they join the program, signs a contract that has three main provisions: the right to be safe, the right to be respected, and the right to study. For the weekly sessions, the tutors arrive half an hour before the students. They sit at the tables and wait for the students to arrive. When the students arrive, they can choose where they want to sit and with whom they would like to work.

In the first half an hour, the students do the homework they have received from school, with the tutor assisting them with the reading and writing tasks. When this is completed, the students choose a book to read or a game to play. At the end of the session, the students who have done particularly well, receive a certificate of achievement, and all students receive a small treat (such as a chocolate). According to the organisers, the program has a high attendance rate.

The practical organisation of this program is particularly relevant for IE. Not only does it follow some of the main principles of IE (generally speaking, to create an inviting environment for learning and development), but the AGHSP program also combines them with other approaches to education: cognitive (the combination of work and play), behavioural (the certificates of achievement and the treat), and humanist (the choice of whom to work with and the student-focused activities). This program goes beyond facilitating the learning of the school curriculum, and aims at providing the children with the skills and knowledge to overcome their disadvantage. For example, as part of their collaboration with ACU, the university organizes once a year, an open day for the program, where children are invited to attend various activities to familiarize themselves (and their parents) with what a university is and how they can benefit from further education. Furthermore, the tutors (the majority of whom are pre-service students at Australian Catholic University, and thus future teachers) have a space of interaction, in which

they can reflect, in an inviting way, on broader implications of educational programs and social disadvantage.

Based on stakeholders evaluations of the program (parents, tutors, students) it has been found that a number of changes has occurred in the homes and the wider community: education is valued, children taking more responsibility for their learning, children better able to self-manage, professional development for the tutors, strengthening of community relationships, greater sense of belonging, and increased literacy and numeracy (<http://www.schoolsfirst.edu.au/2010-schools/sacred-heart-school-fitzroy.phps>). In 2010, the AGHSP was awarded the prestigious *School First Award* (an Australian-wide national awards program for all Australian schools, for outstanding examples of school-community partnerships that deliver improved educational outcomes for students).

As can be determined from the above, the AGHSP is based on a collaborative and cooperative school-community partnership working together with local business, industry and the wider community. Certainly it cannot be described, as Peter McLaren may believe, as another mode of hegemonic domination.

Conclusion

In summary, the example of the Atherton Gardens Homework Support Program shows that in order for IE to have a meaningful impact, it needs to be applied in combination with other educational approaches. As such, the authors recommend that Invitational Education needs to develop a bridging point between the various educational approaches, such as cognitive, social, and behavioural.

In addition, while education may be “*fundamentally an imagination of hope*” (Purkey & Novak, 1996, p. 1), IE needs to acquire what Antonio Gramsci called ‘social imaginary,’ that is, an engagement with the broader social and political context. By ignoring the social and political, it runs the risk of falling into the traps described in the introduction. The development and progression of IE will only occur, when IE acquires a moral responsibility and a political commitment:

The moral responsibility is to imagine social scenarios where people can deliberate and construct mechanisms of participation that may expand the workings of democracy. The political commitment is to create a sphere public debate . . . an autonomous sphere of public deliberation that is neither controlled by the market nor controlled by the State (Torres, 1999, p. 109).

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