A Democratic Ethos or a Democratic Community: How perceptions of self and others can contribute to the formation of an authentically inviting community

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Abstract

Invitational Theory is rooted in three theoretical foundations, perceptual theory, self-concept theory, and a democratic ethos (Purkey, Novak, and Fretz, 2020). This essay addresses the third of these foundations, a *Democratic Ethos*. While *perceptual theory* and *self-concept theory* provide a relational foundation for invitational theory, it is the vision and practice of a democratic ethos that turns theory into reality, leading to the formation of an inviting culture where everybody matters and people learn to live together. In this essay the author seeks to re-introduce the Invitational community to this important theoretical foundation, which could profoundly and positively impact the enacting and application of invitational theory. The author reviews the invitational theory literature concerning a democratic ethos, and also draws on insights from a number of other theoretical voices. The essay concludes with an exploration of a number of potential implications and applications for the Invitational community.

Key Words: *Invitational Theory, Invitational Education, Democratic Ethos, Democratic Education, Perceptual Theory, Self-Concept Theory*

Author's Note: This paper, along with the two papers that preceded it, are dedicated to the memory of William Purkey (1929-2024), who not only helped develop this transformational theory, but who also embodied it in his interactions with others, including me.

Why We Need to Understand the Three Theoretical Foundations

In a previous essay (Schat, 2022), I noted that some people involved in the helping professions are unable to explain the theoretical foundations that inform their choices and decisions. While doing good things, it was observed that they could not always explain the foundational beliefs that informed their actions. While theories are often hypothetical constructs, a well-designed theory can provide a clarifying explanation. A good theory can play an essential touchstone role: serving as a guide for assessing and making decisions. However, a theory alone does not have all that much value. Ideally, a theory leads to appropriate theoretically informed practices or actions. This theory-to-practice connection and interaction is essential. Otherwise, a theory is merely a good idea, or simply a thought experiment.

My commitment to the principle of theory to practice serves as the underlying premise behind the three-article series, whereby each focused upon the three theoretical foundations of Invitational Education (IE) theory. I believe that if IE community has a clear and firm grasp of each of the underlying theories, they will be better-positioned to enact IE with great efficacy, potentially leading to a stronger and richer embodiment of IE theory. There is something about the intentionality and transparency of ensuring that one's actions "fit" one's stated beliefs that allows an individual to act with greater potential power and impact.

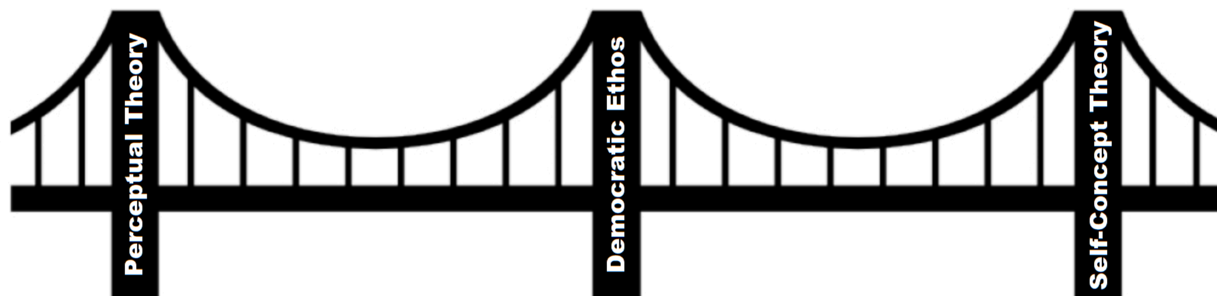


Figure 1: Invitational Theory – A Bridge with Three Firm Foundations

The Three Theoretical Foundations

Purkey and Novak (2016) suggest that Invitational Education (IE) theory is like a bridge that rests "on a foundation of three sturdy piers: Democratic Ethos, the Perceptual Tradition, and Self-Concept Theory. Each of these foundations deepens the imaginative possibilities of the inviting approach" (p. 7, see Figure 1). As I have reiterated, I believe there is immense value in understanding each of these three foundations, and drawing on them to directly shape and guide our IE practice.

1. Perceptual Theory. At the heart of perceptual theory is the conviction that an individual's behavior is rooted in their perception, the way they look at their situation and context. Every behavior makes sense to the behaver in the moment of behaving. As a result, it is possible to read a person's behavior backwards (Combs et al., 1976) in order to discern the perception that caused it. This has significant implications for the helping professions. It reminds us that if we want to position a person to change their behavior, we can't focus solely on the behavior. We need to enable them focus on their perception, the way they looked at the antecedent situation, providing them with the opportunity to change their own perception, thereby leading to a change in their behavior. As noted in a previous essay (Schat, 2022), this has immense significance for invitational theory. Perceptions of *self-as-inviting* are essential for extending invitations to others. More

significantly, perceptions of *self-as-invited* are absolutely crucial for an individual's ability to respond to an invitation that has been extended to them. If they believe they are invited, and that they are safe to respond to the invitation, they are likely to do so. If they do not, regardless of the intentions of the inviter, the invitation is unlikely to be recognized and responded to.

2. Self-Concept Theory. The most significant perception that influences an individual human being is their perception of themselves, often described as their self-concept. This is not meant to minimize the importance of how they perceive others, of course. But self-perception comes first. As perceptual theory reminds us, our perception exercises a fundamental shaping impact on our behavior. Having a perception of *self-as-able* and *self-as-important* is very, very different from having a perception of *self-as-unable* or *self-as-insignificant*. As noted in a previous essay (Schat, 2023), understanding the nature and role of self-concept is also essential for the inviting tradition, as it will directly shape the perceptions and behaviors of both the inviter and the invited. At the heart of invitational theory is a commitment to the pursuit of the wellbeing and flourishing of others, and both of these are firmly rooted in an individual's self-concept.

3. A Democratic Ethos or Democratic Community. The focus of this article is the third theoretical foundation, typically described as a Democratic Ethos. In my experience, this concept is often the least-familiar of the three, and also seems to be the hardest to understand and explain. For this reason, when I introduce it to others, I describe it as a Democratic Community instead, a clarification that seems to be quite helpful. However, even though it is may be the hardest to explain, it is also potentially the most significant foundational element, particularly when it comes to establishing an authentic inviting community. For this reason, I have placed this "pillar" at the center of the bridge illustration (see Figure 1).

Perceptual theory and self-concept theory focus on the nature, perceptions, and behaviors of the person. A democratic ethos describes the context or community that is enacted in order to enable the nature of the person to be authentically exercised, leading to behaviors and perceptions that are both self-directed and other-oriented. Human beings are made for relationships and wired for interdependence. Invitational theory reminds us that, when the obstacles are removed or minimized, human beings generally find their own best way, making wise choices that are likely to contribute to both their own flourishing and wellbeing and the flourishing and wellbeing of others. In other words, perceptions of self and other are not merely for the benefit of the individual but are to be activated and engaged for the benefit of those around them, for relationships and

community. The first two theoretical foundations find their purpose in a community *where everybody matters* (Novak, Armstrong, and Browne, 2014) and we figure out *how to live together* (Laden, 2022) in a way that contributes to the wellbeing and flourishing of all. Everyone is invited to be intentionally inviting.

An Introduction to a Democratic Ethos or a Democratic Community

I believe that a democratic community is the best way for a diverse, pluralistic, multi-cultural society to live together, or for an inviting organization to flourish. A democratic community is not easy, and it is always at risk. A key reason for this is that a community demands commitment to interdependence and interconnectedness. In our post-pandemic, post-modern culture, the combination of increasing diversity and increasing entrenchment poses a very real threat to our collective commitment to a democratic community. I define entrenchment as the increasing pattern of collectivist contexts and mindsets, where individuals tend to prefer surrounding themselves with like-minded people, and tend to too-easily adopt an adversarial and defensively-offensive approach to those who hold different beliefs.

A democratic ethos provides a theoretical perspective that clearly demonstrates the need for valuing and respecting all others, including those who disagree with you. We need to value everyone because we need to live together. This is not easy, nor is it instinctive and automatic. A democratic community, the embodiment of a democratic ethos, requires a conscious acknowledgement and commitment TO both the theory and the implied behavior. And this is something that requires practice and feedback…and patience, grace, and forgiveness. We need to practice the vision or spirit of democracy to enact it.

In this section I will highlight a number of key characteristics or elements of a democratic community: valuing others, creating space for the voices of others, democratic relationships, and the importance of communication.

A Democratic Community Values Others

Two foundational declarations rest at the heart of a democratic community: "Everybody Matters" and "We Live Together". A democratic community actively and intentionally values all the people who are part of the community, even the ones who others might not value, or who do not value themselves. This demands a collective commitment, and requires that we hold each other accountable, as it does not come naturally or easily. A democratic community knows that we need

different types and groups of people because they will provide unique insights and voices that will ultimately benefit all individuals and the interconnected community. Everyone needs the opportunity for wellbeing and flourishing.

A Democratic Community Prioritizes Creating Space for the Voices of Others

One of the greatest challenges to a democratic community in our current diverse, pluralistic, multicultural context is that there are so many different voices. And they don't always agree about things. As a result, it can be far too easy and too tempting to overlook or silence minority voices, particularly when they are unfamiliar or annoying, or when they disagree with our own beliefs.

A democratic community actively creates space for everyone to be heard. It creates a vision for the value and importance of other voices, in both theory (e.g., the grandiose idea) and in practice (e.g., the messy reality). It creates a commitment to the free exchange of ideas, and a commitment to mutual influence. A democratic community not only tolerates minority groups, but protects them and encourages their voices (e.g., the right to exist, to speak, to be heard, and to have impact on outcomes that influence them). One of the hallmarks of an authentic democratic community is that minority voices are positioned to both offer alternative insights and to serve as a vocal critic of majority opinions. This is not easy for those in the minority or the majority.

Democratic Relationships

A democratic community, rooted in a democratic ideal or vision, requires democratic relationships. Gordon (2002) defines democratic relationships as relationships where "I help you meet your needs and you help me meet mine, relationships that are synergistic (separate persons working cooperatively together with greater total beneficial effects than the sum of their individual effects), and relationships that are equalitarian" (p. 240). Such relationships require mutual commitment and mutual vulnerability. Carl Rogers (1977) emphasizes both the mutuality and the context, noting that "Where control is shared, where facilitative conditions are present, it has been demonstrated that vital, sound, enriching relationships occur" (p. 288).

The Importance of Communication

At the heart of a vision for a democratic community is a commitment to effective and appropriate communication. System Theory (von Bertalanffy, 2000) and Communication Theory (Craig, 1999) remind us that communication is multi-layered and multi-faceted. Perceptual Theory reminds us that communication is a form of behavior, and, like all behavior, is both rooted in

individual perception and shape the perceptions of those who experience it. As Dewey (as cited in Boydston, 1988) noted, “Everything which bars freedom and fullness of communication sets up barriers that divide human beings into sets and cliques, into antagonistic sects and factions, and thereby undermines the democratic way of life” (p. 227). A democratic community must pay close attention to communication patterns and processes. There is a minimal need for authentic active listening and other-oriented thinking. Dewey (1916/1966) speaks to the complexity of a commitment to consensus and democracy, reminding us that:

> Persons do not become a society by living in physical proximity, any more than a [human] ceases to be socially influenced by being so many feet or miles removed from others...If, however, they were all cognizant of the common end and all interested in it so that they regulated their specific activity in view of it, then they would form a community. But this would involve communication. Each would have to know what the other was about and would have to have some way of keeping the other informed as to his own purpose and progress. Consensus demands communication (pp. 4-5).

The Problem Exhibited by Western Democracies

It is imperative that we recognize that a democratic ethos or democratic community is not the same thing as the political democracy exhibited in North America. They are connected in theory, but they are not the same thing. This is a common misperception, and it is essential that we challenge this whenever we encounter it. This gets to the heart of the issue of perception and belief. There are many who believe that western democracies are true democracies, while other democracies are merely aspirational. From this writer’s perspective, the problem is that what we have in the west is not a pure democracy. Rather, it is a pseudo-democracy that emerged when the new spirit of democracy first encountered the existing liberalism and capitalism in North America (MacPherson, 1965). What we have in the west is liberal-democracy, which emerged when democracy accommodated itself to liberalism. The consequence is that when liberal-democracy falters, people assume that democracy itself is at fault. When the trust and hope promised by the democratic vision has been damaged, some may believe that democracy has been tried and found to be wanting. Indeed, there are some who believe democracy has *ended* (de Chosal, 2017; Laden, 2022), *failed* (Last, 2024; Postema, 2020), or *died* (Jordan, 2019; Levitsky & Ziblatt, 2018).

The following section reviews a number of insights that emerged during my review of the democratic ethos literature and discourse, thereby examining from my perspective: Why democracy appears to have failed; The impact of Western Liberal-Democracy; The confluence of

neoliberalism and neoconservatism; Considering two contested meanings of democracy; and Why democracy doesn't have to end.

Why Democracy Appears to Have Failed

It is not a stretch to conclude that Democracy does not work, or that we no longer are a democratic society. Some of the events of the COVID-19 pandemic, along with some of the responses to these events, clearly indicate an increasing culture of entrenchment, mistrust, and partisan politics. 62% of Americans do not talk about their political beliefs out of fear of offending others (Cato, 2020). As tellingly, about 1 in 3 people no longer talk to a friend or family member because of political disagreements (Peters, 2018). I heard numerous stories about families that no longer gather together because of political disagreements. Brookings (2017) describes a survey of US college students indicates that many of them believe that it is acceptable to silence expressions of offensive opinions. Brookings (2017) notes that "A surprisingly large fraction of students believe it is acceptable to act—including resorting to violence—to shut down expression they consider offensive" (para 4).

In recent decades, political discourse has diminished in complexity and a shared commitment to airing differing opinions, moving from an open discussion of pertinent issues to a tendency to focus on binary thinking (e.g., complex issues, 2 polar positions) and an emphasis on speed of closure, rather than on the importance of creating space for the voices that disagree with the majority opinion (e.g., "this is a waste of time" vs. "this is an essential part of the process"). There has been an increased emphasis on the voice of the majority and on partisan politics, leading to an emphasis on shutting down dissent and caricaturing or demonizing living human beings who hold different views, a mocking echo of the democratic vision. Something is wrong with this picture.

The Impact of Our Western Liberal-Democracy

In the context of such concerning patterns, it can be helpful to consider the history of democracy in the West. As Macpherson (1965) noted, when it was first introduced, democracy was clearly a *bad* idea. Anyone with education and wisdom knew that allowing the lower-class masses to rule simply would not work. By World War I, however, democracy was clearly perceived to be a *good* thing and was something worth fighting to keep. This remained the case for about 50 years. However, when more proletarian forms of democracy emerged (e.g., rule of the people, by the people, without the trappings of capitalism and liberalism), the term, democracy,

itself became much more *ambiguous*. Democracy exhibited a number of different forms, and these forms proved to be quite diverse.

In North America, what emerged was a fascinating amalgam of liberalism, capitalism, and democracy, has often been described as liberal-democracy. As Macpherson (1965) observed:

> by the time democracy came, in the present liberal-democratic countries, it was no longer opposed to the liberal society and the liberal state. It was, by then, not an attempt by the lower class to overthrow the liberal state or the competitive market economy; it was an attempt by the lower class to take their fully and fairly competitive place within those institutions and that system of society. Democracy had been transformed. From a threat to the liberal state it had become a fulfillment of the liberal state. (p. 14)

What we ended up with in the west was a liberal-democracy that, by necessity, required that democracy accommodate itself to liberalism. And a key part of this accommodation was a natural acceptance of key tenets of a capitalist mindset. Given their economic foundations, these tenets make the establishment of an authentic democratic community and the commitment to not only tolerating but actually encouraging and seeking out marginalized voices, quite challenging at times, particularly when economic interests predominate.

One of the hallmarks of democracy is the commitment to creating space and a platform for different voices to speak and ensure that people experience both care and justice. This is characterized by a commitment to people and to the democratic ideal. As Obama (2009) observed, “The strongest democracies flourish from frequent and lively debate, but they endure when people of every background and belief find a way to set aside smaller differences in service of a greater purpose” (Para 11). When we begin to lose what Bond (2019) describes as a “vibrant contestatory public sphere” (p. 16), the potential for silencing, marginalization, and injustice come to the fore. As Niebuhr (1960) once wrote, “Man’s capacity for justice makes democracy possible, but man’s inclination to injustice makes democracy necessary” (p. xii). Martin Luther King (1963) said it even more powerfully, reminding us that "Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere. We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly” (Para 4). A democratic community must be an inescapable network of mutuality. Everyone matters. And we need to live together. If we can’t do this, our very humanity is at risk. As Martha Nussbaum (1988) prophetically declared,

> Being a human means accepting promises from other people and trusting that other people will be good to you. When that is too much to bear, it is always possible to retreat into the thought, “I’ll live for my own comfort, my own revenge, my own anger, and I just won’t

> be a member of society anymore." That really means, "I won't be a human being anymore." (Nussbaum in Moyers, 1988)

The Confluence of Neoliberalism and Neoconservatism

In an article focused on democratic education, Atkinson (2017) raises an important distinction, suggesting that to a large extent neoliberalism and neoconservatism have come together in their attempts to use education for political and economic purposes, and that these purposes are likely to lead to undemocratic outcomes, causing students to not be educated for democracy, but primarily for economic purposes. Atkinson (2017) writes, "The market-ideology of neoliberalism and the moral-political ideology of neoconservatism leads to a hybrid system, a new form of governmentality that situates citizens in an undemocratic form of society" (p. 3). In this context, Atkinson (2017) warns that students are not being prepared to be democratic citizens, "but rather docile obedient workers who have a moral duty to further America's competitiveness in a global marketplace." (p. 3). Atkinson (2017) reminds the reader that Dewey always insisted that education is political, and that the democratic vision and democratic education can challenge this:

> Utilizing Dewey's philosophy, what makes democratic values transcend neoliberalism and neoconservatism are their inclusive, critical, and deliberative expectations that broaden human cooperation, enlightenment, and the possibilities of emancipation from existing ideological hegemony. Broad democratic inclusiveness enhances the legitimacy of public policies by means of considering diverse perspectives, which in turn, enhances the substantive and normative outcomes applied to the public at large. This again is directly in line with Dewey's pragmatic stance toward educating, making use of multiple perspectives to move society forward. (p. 7)

Considering Two Contested Meanings of Democracy

Bond (2019) reminds us that democracy has two contested meanings. On the one hand, there is the democratic vision or democratic ideal, which Bond (2019) describes as a democracy that "holds the promise of a more just and fairer future, that suggests people hold the power to determine their version of a liveable life. It is a democracy that enables vibrant debate and contestation, and where different worlds coexist." (p. 14). On the other hand, there is the democracy that is practiced, which Bond (2019) describes as "an elitist, paternalistic set of practices and institutions that maintain a more-than-liveable life for the few." (14). One of the ironies of modern political democracy is that it actually silences some voices while privileging

others, the opposite of the original nature and purpose of democracy itself. As Bond (2019) notes, "The epistemological and ontological hegemony of western systems of democracy perpetuate historical inequalities and injustices that are too often invisible to those in dominant groups." (p. 15). This distinction between the democratic ideal and democratic process is an essential one when it comes to our focus on a democratic ethos or democratic community. I will return to this later.

Why Democracy Doesn't Need to End

Laden (2002) reminds us that democracy does not need to end, even if it appears that it might be ending, and even if there are those who would like to see it end. Like other theorists, Laden draws a careful distinction between the political system (institutional democracy) and the theoretical social commitment expressed through social democracy. As noted earlier, Laden reminds us that democracy will not end as long as people are committed to figuring out how to live together. He writes:

> The problem that democracy aims to solve is how to act and live together, given that we are not so united. It does so by giving us a task to do together that turns out to be possible under conditions of pluralism: working out together the terms of our living together. (p. 33)

Laden (2022) offers a helpful image, contrasting the difference between "acting together" and "acting side-by-side":

> Acting and living side-by side requires us to coordinate our actions to avoid running into each other or getting into irresolvable conflicts, and thus requires that each be aware of others and what they are doing. But that coordination can be achieved without there being anything that we see as our action by, for instance, a procedure for collective decision-making that pools our individual choices in a fair manner. In contrast, when we act and live together, we undertake a more robust form of sharing, where we not only coordinate our actions but understand those actions as ours, as what we are doing (together) that is not reducible to what each of us does. We act together when we act in a way that is governed by shared norms, rules, or goals that don't merely coordinate our behavior (lay out what each of us is to do) but make our action intelligible to us as our action (as what we are doing). (p. 33)

Laden (2022) describes these interactions as the "lifeblood of democracies" (p. 38), reminding us "we should learn to see our democracy as supported and sustained when we strive to be open to everyone's contribution to how we live together: when we treat others not as outsiders and threats, but as neighbors and potential civic friends" (Laden, 2022, p. 37). If we are committed to this process, democracy will not end.

Arguably, western democracy has been struggling. In very practical ways, not everyone seems to be empowered. Are we living more harmoniously or does it seem that we have become fractured by tribalism? Given increased tribal thinking has reinforced partisan beliefs rather than inviting open dialogue, especially since the COVID 19 pandemic, should we not consider a discussion of the democratic ethos a pressing and urgent concern?

Despite these concerning times, those that would advocate for Invitational Education would remind us that the problem is not with the democratic ideal or the democratic vision, but rather the way our institutions have been enacting and practicing it. We can learn from this. We can aspire to do better. The democratic ethos and Invitational Education theory can contribute to the solution.

Voices from the IE Literature

As mentioned earlier, the democratic ethos is often the least understood of the three theoretical foundations of IE. Upon review of the existing Invitational Education theory literature, I was struck by how the contents for this complex but essential foundation was often shorter than for the other two (perceptual theory and self-concept theory). Despite the brevity, however, a number of essential and distinctive elements were found. This section will review the five key democratic ethos elements that emerged in the review of Invitational Education theory literature:

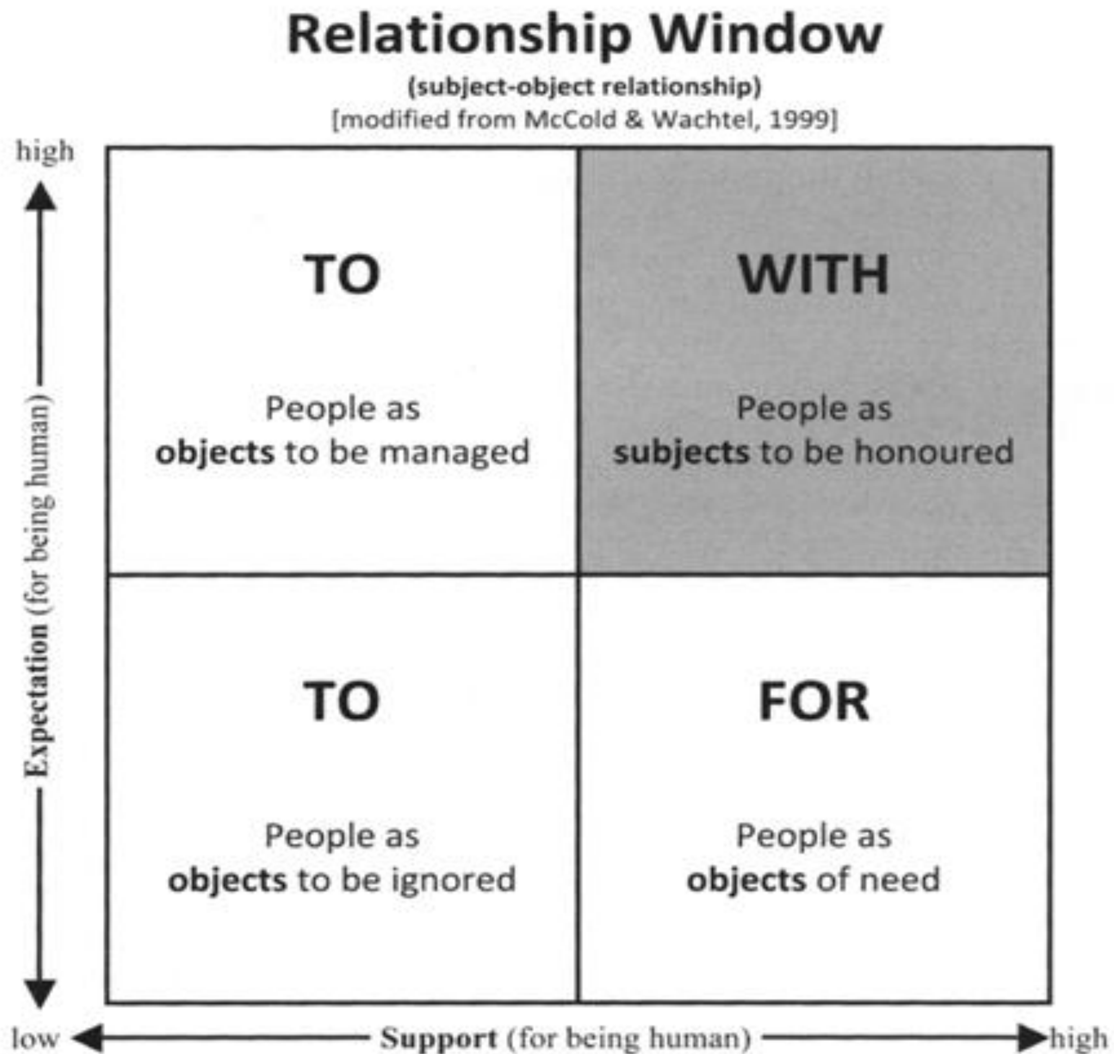
Democratic Ethos as Part of a Larger Ethical Project

A democratic ethos is part of a larger ethical project that gets to the heart of what it means to be human in community with others. Purkey, Novak, and Fretz (2020) clearly articulate this, noting that "The inviting approach is rooted in a much larger ethical project. It is rooted in the aim of enabling people to live more fulfilling lives through positive, non-coercive means by being involved in doing-with relationships" (p. 27). At the heart of this project is an intentional commitment to the fact that "all people matter" (Purkey, Novak, & Fretz, 2020, p. 27). As Dewey (1916/1966) observed, "A democracy is more than a form of government; it is primarily a mode of associated living, of conjoint communicated experiences" (p. 87). Living together is not easy. But it is a necessary dimension of being human and being in relationship with others.

Purkey, Novak, and Fretz (2020) highlight the importance of a "doing with" (p. 27) mindset, again drawing on the work of John Dewey, noting:

For Dewey, it is through the communication process that people can develop and maintain common values and enjoy community living. Mutual respect is a hallmark of this commitment to a life of dialogue that involves working with people in doing-with as opposed to doing-to ways" (p. 27).

Figure 2: *The Relationship Window* (Vaandering, 2014, p. 516)



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As noted in Figure 2 above, Vaandering (2014, p. 516) provides a powerful visual, intended to highlight and contrast a "doing-with" mindset that intentionally and strategically prioritizes this mutuality of relationship and the importance of recognizing all human beings as independent subjects to be honored, valued, and and supported. Purkey and Novak (2016) seems to elaborate upon this mindset, pointing out that:

> The ideal of democracy is based on "doing with" people as opposed to "doing to" people. Being "done to" is to be treated as an underling or a vessel to be filled, demeaned of inherent dignity and potential. Being "done with" is to be treated as an active participant in a meaningful process. (p. 8)

Democratic Ethos as a Guiding Ideal

Within the inviting tradition, a fundamental premise is the recognition that the democratic ethos should serve as a guiding ideal, a touchstone by which our actions and choices can be determined and assessed. Purkey, Novak, and Fretz (2020) observe that when used as a guiding idea, "the democratic ethos points to ever-enriching communicative process. As such an ideal, the democratic ethos should not be judged as a waste of time or a distraction because it is not attained in every, or even most, instances" (p. 28). Even if we are unable to fully realize our goals and vision, the pursuit, the process, and the ideal itself are still worth seeking and pursuing. Purkey, Novak, and Fretz (2020) observe that "A commitment to the democratic ethos is therefore a commitment to the conditions and processes that make understanding, mutual respect, and continuous dialogue possible" (p. 28).

Purkey, Siegel, and Novak (2010) provide a simple but powerful visual of the *democratic ideal* (see Figure 3), noting that "An ideal represents something of value that is worthy of pursuit. As active forces, democratic ideals encourage you to move along an ethical path from what is to what might be to what should be to what will be" (p. 11). The democratic ideal clearly focuses attention on the fundamental claim of the inviting tradition: that everyone matters. This ideal can serve as a

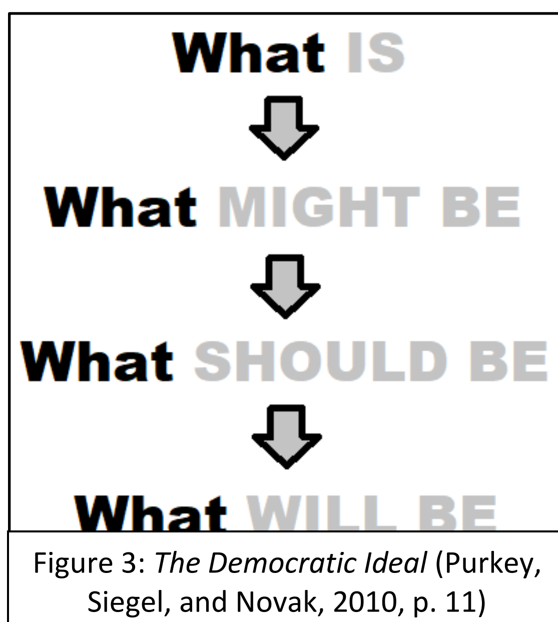

Figure 3: *The Democratic Ideal* (Purkey, Siegel, and Novak, 2010, p. 11)

personal, professional, and communal guide. Importantly, Purkey, Siegel, and Novak (2010) also remind us of the alternative: “Acting without democratic ideals and instead favoring autocratic tactics, people may attempt to resolve conflicts without regard for the dignity of the people involved and the fairness of the situation” (p. 12).

Democratic Ethos as a Theoretical Framework for Community

The entire democratic vision rises and falls on the ability of individuals to pay attention to others, to have a healthy self-concept, and to have a healthy concept of others, a firm commitment to the wellbeing and flourishing of others. Another key aspect of the inviting tradition is the recognition that a democratic ethos provides a theoretical framework for community. As Novak, Armstrong, and Browne (2014) point out,

> For this communicative sense of democracy to work better, a theoretical perspective that shows respect for the person is necessary. The perceptual tradition fits the bill. It links the expansive nature of democracy with the intentional importance of paying attention to how people see themselves and the situations they are in. (p. 28)

In many ways, invitational theory fits this role perfectly, as the unique combination of perceptual theory, self-concept theory, and a democratic ethos rooted in a democratic ideal intentionally and transparently highlights that everyone matters, and that we matter to each other as individuals and as part of an interconnected community.

Defining Democratic Ethos

In the context of invitational theory, a democratic ethos is the context in which perceptual theory and self-concept theory are practiced, with an intentional emphasis on the importance of perceptions of self and others and their impact on behavior. Purkey and Novak (2016) define democracy as “a social ideal based on the conviction that all people matter and can grow through participation in self-governance” (p. 7). They elaborate on this vision, noting that:

> The goal of the inviting approach is to have people work together to construct the ethical character, social practices, and educational institutions that promote a fulfilling, shared life. Implied here is a respect for people and their abilities and their concerns as they act responsibly on issues that impact their lives. Deeply embedded in this respect for persons is a commitment to the ideal that people who are affected by decisions should have a say in formulating those decisions. (p. 7)

The final line above is a constant refrain in the invitational theory literature: everybody matters and people should have input into decisions that influence them. Novak, Armstrong, and Browne (2014) highlight this, defining democratic ethos as "a commitment to the proposition that all people matter and individuals and communities have a right to participate meaningfully in deciding the guiding principles that control their lives" (p. 22).

Democracy is an Educative Process

The intersection of the democratic ethos and education is an obvious one that I will explore in more depth later in this paper, when I focus attention on practical applications and implications. Ensuring that our children learn about and experience a democratic ethos is an obvious and essential plan for action, and part of the hope and promise for the future. However, it is worth noting here that the inviting tradition reminds us that *democracy is itself an educative process*. Purkey and Novak (2016) point out that "participating in democratic practices is vital because it is the deepest way to teach democratic values. Viewed this way, democracy is an educative process, a social way of coming together to enjoy, reflect, and act responsibly" (p. 8). The lived experience of the embodiment of the democratic ideal will exert a profound impact on perception and behavior. Novak, Armstrong, and Browne (2014) again provide helpful clarity, observing that this participation "is educative because people grow as they work to understand and appreciate the perspectives of others and learn to think more imaginatively and deeply about the consequences of social actions" (p. 23). This concept involving the educative impact of the democratic ethos is an essential one. It matters because the lived experience of being valued and valuing others is life shaping, even transformational. Breathing the air of an authentically democratic ethos establishes rhythms and patterns that may never be forgotten, even if the individual experiences non-democratic practices in other settings (like an autocratic or toxic workplace). Having "breathed the air" of a community characterized by a democratic vision, the individual is likely to long and aspire for more, for themselves and for others. Some may be courageous enough to become the change they want to see in the world.

Voices from Beyond the Invitational Education Theory Literature

This paper will eventually conclude with an intentional emphasis on both the democratic vision or ideal and the need for a practical embodiment, extending the theoretical insights from

previous voices articulated earlier. Before moving on, however, I want to touch briefly on three additional theoretical traditions that resonate with IE theory and a democratic ethos, which should contribute important insights into a vision for embodying both the democratic ideal and the intentionally inviting vision.

Care Theory

Bond's (2019) introduction to a democratic ethos invites Care Theory into the conversation:

> I suggest that the vibrant, contestatory sphere that radical democrats argue for, while important, is insufficient to shift the epistemological and ontological hegemonies at work. While this work disrupts the order of the sensible, highlighting the contingency and cracks within these hegemonies, it seems to me that there is a need for a radical shift in political subjectivity away from individualised responsibility, blame, and liability *to a more collective ethos of care and responsibility*. (16—italics mine)

Bond makes the point that what is needed is commitment to people and relationships. A key voice in the care theory literature, Noddings (2013) reminds us that all human beings have two care needs, the need to care for others and the need to be cared for by others. These two fundamental needs cut to the core of the democratic ethos. Tronto's (1995) article on the relationship between care and politics suggests that we should "see people as constantly enmeshed in relationships of care" (p. 142). Building on perceptual theory, Schat (2021) draws an important distinction between *offering* care and *successfully communicating* care. Offering care involves *caring intentions* and *caring actions*, while the successful communication of care recognizes that the offering of care is necessary but insufficient: what matters most is the additional focus on *the perception and response of the cared-for*. When they recognize and respond to the care that is offered to them, a caring relationship can form. The distinction between intent and impact is pivotal for the authentic embodiment of a democratic ethos or community. Human beings need to be part of networks or communities of care.

Cooperative Learning Theory

My early years as a classroom teacher were focused on learning about and enacting Cooperative Learning Theory (cf. Gillies, 2016; Johnson & Johnson, 1999; Kagan, 2008). The theory carefully distinguishes between "group work" and authentic cooperative learning, characterized by what Johnson and Johnson (1999) describe as the five essential elements: positive interdependence, individual accountability, face-to-face promotive interaction, social skills, and

group processing. When these elements are all present, amazing things can happen, influencing both learning and the learning community. Cooperative Learning Theory offers three important insights into the development of a democratic community, (a) the importance of community building, (b) identifying and teaching social skills, and (c) teaching conflict management.

a. The Importance of Community Building: Team-building and community-building are a significant priority within the cooperative learning discourse. You can't assume that when you put people together they will form a community that supports each other. You need to build community through intentional and strategic practices. While seemingly intuitive, this central premise is often overlooked: you can't just put people together in a group. You need to help them get to know each other and to learn how to get along and work together. This step is often skipped, potentially preventing the formation of community from the very outset. While you can't build a community out of a society in the same way, within an organization or institution you can still find ways to ensure that people recognize that a society is composed of a diverse range of people, particularly in today's multicultural, pluralist context. Everybody matters. And you can find ways to remind them that they are part of a community filled with unique individuals, and that community members need to learn to work together and get along.

b. Identifying and Teaching Social Skills: One of the key strengths of cooperative learning theory is that it does not make assumptions or take things for granted. Those who apply the theory often overlook this. One of the key contributions of the cooperative learning discourse is the importance of identifying and teaching social skills. Naming them matters. So does developing clear guidelines and expectations. Once again, we often assume that people know how to work together, or know what we mean when we tell them they need to work together. Instead, we need to deliberately and strategically teach the social skills that are needed for the learning community. This is another important insight for the formation of a democratic ethos within an organization. Expectations need to be named, explained, and maintained. When expectations are not met, they need to be clarified and addressed.

c. Teaching Conflict Management: The democratic ethos literature points out another thing that is patently obvious, but also easy to overlook: we should anticipate disagreement. Conflict is normal in any group setting. In a diverse, multicultural, pluralistic context, we can be certain that people will disagree, and that they will need to work at getting along. As was the case in the previous two topics, the cooperative learning literature encourages leaders to lean into reality

and certainty. Conflict can be a strength and an opportunity to learn and grow. It is not something that needs to be avoided, nor does it need to be combative. This, too, often requires a shift in perception and behavior. If there is anything we learned from the pandemic it is that people do not naturally get along, and often perceive others with mistrust and skepticism. Post-Covid entrenchment has exacerbated this. A new vision needs to be cast, and the democratic ideal has the potential to be part of the solution.

Humanistic Psychology

Most members of the inviting tradition are likely aware that invitational theory emerged from what is now known as humanistic psychology (cf. Bugental, 1964 and Greening, 2006). Individuals such as Carl Rogers, George Kelly, Arthur Combs, and Abraham Maslow were part of these early roots. Both William Purkey and John Novak were profoundly influenced by interactions with these key figures. In many ways, this is the "camp" in which invitational theory finds itself, at a conceptual level. Three of the foundational insights from this tradition warrant attention in the context of our focus on a democratic ethos: (a) Baumeister and Leary's (1995) *belongingness hypothesis*, (b) Maslow's (1943) *hierarchy of needs*, and (c) Combs's (Combs, Richards, & Richards, 1976) conceptualization of the need for *adequacy*.

a. The Belongingness Hypothesis: Current emphases on belonging, connectedness, and attachment trace their roots back to Baumeister and Leary's (1995) belongingness hypothesis. Their theory hypothesizes that all human beings have an intrinsic need to belong, a need to form interpersonal relationships with others. These relationships should be characterized by mutuality and care. This foundational need for belonging resonates with the democratic ideal and the democratic community it envisions.

b. A Hierarchy of Needs: Maslow's (1943) hierarchy of needs identifies a progression of basic human needs, from physiological and safety needs to other needs that must be fulfilled (belonging, esteem, and self-actualization). At the heart of Maslow's theory is the belief that in order for higher needs to be met, lower and more foundational needs must be met first. A democratic society that seeks wellbeing and flourishing should encourage all members toward self-actualization. As the theory implies, however, this demands that the previous needs must be met first. In other words, a democratic community must be a community that addresses safety, belonging, and esteem needs. Only then can it focus on the higher order needs.

c. The Need for Adequacy: Known for developing Perceptual Theory, Art Combs (Combs, Richards, & Richards, 1976) provided an interesting counter to Maslow's theory. Combs, a contemporary and colleague of Maslow's, suggested that rather than describing the different needs in the hierarchy as *needs*, they should be rearticulated as a series of *goals*. He proposed that all of these goals should then combined into a single fundamental need: the need for *adequacy*. Combs and his co-authors (1976) noted that in "perceptual psychology we reserve the term need for the most basic, fundamental striving of an organism rooted in the nature of protoplasm itself, which we have called the need for self-actualization or adequacy" (p. 132). The authors (Combs, Richards, & Richards, 1976) define adequacy as a person who is "capable of dealing effectively and efficiently with the exigencies of life, both now and in the future" (p. 45). A person who is adequate can handle the challenges of life. Combs's subsequent writings convey the fundamental role that relationships play in the pursuit and realization of adequacy. Here, humans become who they are meant to be in the context of community.

All three of these insights from the humanistic tradition coalesce around the foundational human need for relationality and community. This resonates deeply with the two fundamental emphases of a democratic community: everybody matters, and we must learn how to live together because we need each other.

The Democratic Ideal or Vision

At this point, let's focus upon applications and implications. In the previous sections key insights from several voices related to a Democratic Ethos were addressed. Now, given what we know about the nature and potential impact of a democratic community and recognizing that this is one of the theoretical foundations for invitational theory, let's address what we can do in response. The next two sections follow the path implied by the literature, distinguishing between a democratic ideal or vision and the embodied practice of democratic principles.

Casting a Vision for the Democratic Ideal

The democratic ethos literature consistently draws attention to the contrast between democratic theory and democratic practice. The theory clearly insists that all people have a voice into decisions and actions that influence their lives. The practice of democracy often falls far short. Voices are silenced. People are overlooked or disempowered. Economic interests often trump human elements.

I advocate for the importance of a democratic *vision* or *ideal*. Vision refers to a way of looking at the world that influences how we act in the world. As noted earlier, the democratic ideal holds up a goal or standard that we will pursue, even when we and others fall short. Purkey, Siegel, and Novak's (2010) visual image (see Figure 3) capture this well, challenging the inviting community to move from what *is* to what *might be* to what *should be* to what *will be*. Casting a vision for the democratic ideal confronts us with the need to take the courageous and risky step to move from what *should be* to what *will be*.

The Meaning of Democracy

Given the fact that Western democracy is primarily a liberal-democracy, an almost democracy that resulted when liberalism and democratic principles combined (see Macpherson, 1965), critics often call for a return to the original meaning of the word "democracy." The concept first appeared in Greek city states in the 5th century BC. *Demo / kratos* literally described the "rule of the people," a direct contrast to the more common pattern of the rule of the wealthy aristocracy. Lincoln's (1863) Gettysburg address contains what is likely the most famous articulation, "government of the people, by the people, for the people" (para 3). Democracy simply means that people have the right to rule or lead themselves. The complicator, of course, is that they need to do it together, ensuring that every voice is heard, and that conditions are created to enable, rather than limit and constrain care and community.

Radical Democracy

I acknowledge that I tread on shaky ground here, as the concept of "radical democracy" is both contested and layered. It has meant different things to different people since being introduced in the 1800s, further complexified by its rebirth in the 1980s and 1990s. However, I felt it appropriate to at least draw the concept to the reader's attention, pointing out that for some time, people have been calling for a return to foundational democratic principles. Radical democracy is a call to return to the original definition and intent of democracy: to give power to the people and to ensure that every voice can be heard (Bond, 2019). This is not a new call. But it is one worth noting in the pursuit of a renewal of the inviting approach.

Recent emphases on radical democracy can be traced back to Laclau and Mouffe (1985), who, building on post-Marxist foundations, called for both social and political change that challenged the prevailing neoliberal and neoconservative conceptualization of democracy. They prioritized the need for freedom, equality, and difference, with a marked emphasis on issues of

marginalization and asymmetric power imbalances. Connolly (2002) introduced the concept of *agonistic respect*, recognizing the need to welcome difference and dissent. Rather than merely focusing on consensus, radical democracy calls for a "politics of dissent" (Bond, 2019, p. 14) and a "vibrant contestatory public sphere" (Bond, 2019, p. 15). Instead of shying away from diverse opinions and disagreement, a democratic community leans into the diversity that, despite the complexity, can also be its greatest strength.

Democratic Practice or Democracy in Action

In the previous section, the focus was on casting a vision for the pursuit of the democratic ideal in the context of a democratic ethos or community. Here we move from theory to practice, from casting a vision to focusing on democracy in action. In this section I explore three specific practical aspects, (A) democratic dispositions, (B) democratic community practices, and (C) invitational education. The final topic addresses the most obvious interaction between invitational theory and a democratic ethos: teaching children democracy.

A. Dispositions/Normed Behavior

I find it a bit ironic that the first part of my focus on democratic behavior is dispositions, which can sometimes be more theoretical than practical! However, I still believe this is a good place to start: identifying democratic behaviors or dispositions that are likely to position us to have an inviting impact on others. Clearly, this could be a long list. I have identified four democratic dispositions: (a) recognizing and valuing human diversity, (b) developing caring relationships, (c) valuing different voices and inviting dissent, and (d) pursuing civil discourse and civic multilingualism. When a community supports these norms, the impact can be significant.

a. *Recognizing and Valuing Human Diversity:* The most important place to start when it comes to a democratic disposition is the recognition that people are different. They have different personalities, different gifts and skills, different interests, different beliefs. This diversity can certainly make things complicated, particularly given our multicultural, pluralistic context. It is one thing to recognize THAT we are diverse. It is another thing entirely to value this diversity. People are amazing and are capable of amazing things. And, as perceptual theory reminds us, they each need to find their own, best way (Combs, Richards, & Richards, 1976). And they need to value a community that allows others to do the same.

b. Developing Caring Relationships: As a care theorist, I appreciate that Bond (2019) and Tronto (1995) have pulled the language of care into the democratic ethos discourse. As Noddings (2013) reminds us, all human beings have a need to care for others and to be cared for by others. This demands that we be both self-directed and other-oriented. It demands that we pay attention to the potential disconnect between our intentions and our impact. And it calls us to projective empathy (seeking to understand what others think and feel), rather than receptive empathy (e.g., assuming we understand others because we know how we would feel if we were in the same situation).

c. Valuing Different Voices and Inviting Dissent: Because we are all different, and because everybody matters and we need to learn how to live together, we need to invite and welcome dissent as part of growth and community. If we value diversity, we will value the voices of others, even those who hold different beliefs or who disagree with us. This demands patience and grace. And it requires the development of active learning skills and a commitment to authentic listening and dialogue.

d. Pursuing Civil Discourse and Civic Multilingualism: A democratic community requires that we communicate effectively. Kunzman (2012) introduces the concept of civic multilingualism, which he describes as "the ability to converse across different religious and ethics perspectives in search of understanding, compromise, and common ground" (p. 45). He advocates for *"Respect, Not Tolerance"* (Kunzman, 2012, p. 46), noting that tolerance often results in ignorance and reluctant acceptance, while respect "requires an appreciation for why religious adherents believe or live the way they do. Students who have this understanding…will be better equipped to thoughtfully discuss these commitments, especially when conflicts arise in the public square" (Kunzman, 2012, p. 46). However, Kunzman (2012) is also clear that *"Respect Does Not Mean Endorsement"* (p. 46). Seeking to understand where others come from does not obligate us to support their beliefs. But it can create the opportunity for positive relationships, rich dialogue, and mutual appreciation, which are too often missing in today's complex and contested contexts.

B. Democratic Community Practices

Once a foundation of democratic dispositions and norms has been established, a democratic community can identify community practices, protocols and policies for how people are perceived and treated, and how community members communicate and work together. How does the community recognize and value human diversity? How does the community commit to the

development of caring relationships? How does the community value different voices and invite dissent? How does the community promote civil discourse and civic multilingualism? The answers to these questions will set a tone for the community. And the process for enacting what emerges has the potential to be transformational.

This is where invitational theory can speak directly into the process. One of the central elements of enacting the inviting approach is the identification of the five domains or "The 5 Ps" (see Figure 4), or, as Purkey, Novak, and Fretz (2020) write, "five domains that exist in practically every environment and that contribute to the success of failure of each individual" (p. 6). The 5 Ps, people, places, policies, programs, and processes, "make up the ecosystem in which individuals continuously interact" (Purkey, Novak, & Fretz, 2020, p. 6). The 5 Ps are typically associated directly with invitational education. However, they can also be used as a touchstone for assessing the extent to which any community is inviting.

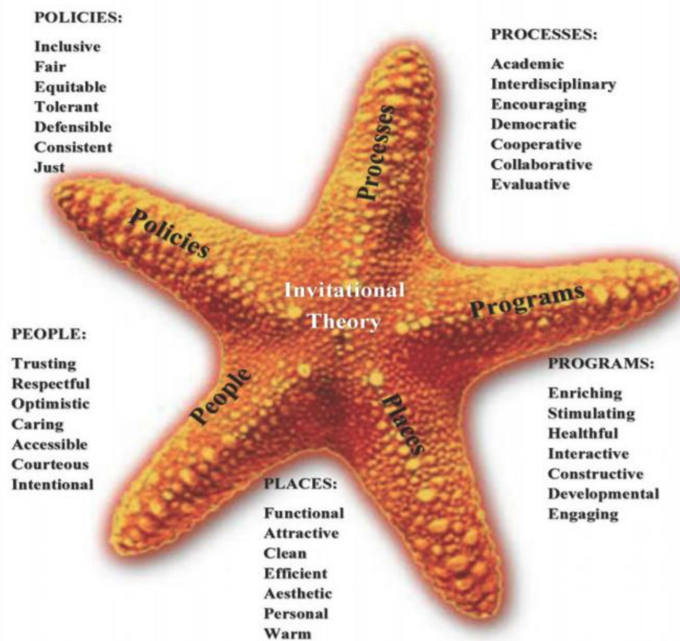

Figure 4. The Five Ps/Domains of Invitational Theory (invitationaleducation.org)

Members of the inviting tradition will be familiar with the starfish analogy, which explains how the 5 Ps work together in order to shape a community. In a powerful image, we are reminded that once a starfish has an oyster in its grasp, it exerts inexorable pressure that virtually guarantees that the starfish will meet its goal: opening the oyster so that the starfish can feed. It does so by exerting constant pressure with all five arms, each resting in turn while the other muscles are activated. As Purkey, Novak, and Fretz (2020) observe,

> Just as the starfish gently and continuously uses each of its arms, in turn, to keep sustained pressure on paying close attention to the 5 Ps.

These five Ps are a helpful frame for identifying the democratic practices required in order to develop a democratic community. Each community will need to develop their own primary

democratic practices, and the process of developing them will play a formative role in the community that emerges.

1. People. The nature and impact of a community is fundamentally shaped by the people in the community. What does the community do to demonstrate that it values all members? To create space for voices to speak? How does the community develop other-oriented capacity and awareness (e.g., personality inventories, emotional intelligence, etc.)?

2. Places. The physical location of a community matters. As Novak, Armstrong, and Browne (2014) point out, "in all senses places are everywhere. They are the sights, sounds, smells, the tangible totality take in by the senses" (p. 142). Does the community value its spaces? Do community members play a role in developing their spaces and places? In very practical terms, where do people interact together? What impact does the layout of a room, the arrangement of the chairs and tables, the location of offices and workplaces, etc., have on the community? Is the culture toxic or life-giving?

3. Policies. Communities are profoundly shaped by their written and unwritten policies. A careful audit needs to be taken to ensure that existing policies "fit" a democratic community that truly values all of its members. This may require that some policies be revised. Others may need to be developed, such as policies and protocols describing how others are to be treated (e.g., intentionality and transparency about respect and dignity, how assessment and evaluation takes place, how disagreements are handled, etc.). If community is the priority, it should also be clear to all community members how they are to handle situations where community norms are broken. Do they remain silent? Or is there any guidance about how to respond?

4. Programs. The fourth P is probably the one that is most relevant to education, with a focus on academic and curricular programs. However, if we define a program as "the thing or things an organization does in completing its mission and task," we open the door to a wise and careful scrutiny of the organization's nature and purposes, which could play a key role in defining both the community and the way in which it performs its unique calling. Once again, the dispositions and other-oriented emphases of the democratic ethos can shape both the community and its mission-related activities.

5. Processes. The fifth and final P may be the most important one, as it can often get to the heart of community norms and patterns, essentially describing "the way we do things around here" (Purkey, Novak, & Schoenlein, 2016, p. 22). As Novak, Armstrong, and Browne (2014) note, the

final P “is concerned with the intangibles: the tone, feel, and spirit of the way the other four Ps are undertaken. Positively, it manifests itself through a democratic ethos, co-operative procedures, and networking among…community members.” (p. 145).

The strength of the five 5 Ps, or the 5 domains of Invitational Educational Theory, is that they collectively provide the foundation for reflecting on or assessing the extent to which a community is inviting. Or, in this case, the extent to which a community embodies the democratic vision. This may seem to be a minor detail, but it is essential and potentially transformational, as the approach can position a community and the people who are part of the community to dialogue about their vision and their lived experiences. It is worth noting, too, that the invitational tradition has developed resources to support communities in this process. While they can learn from the insights and experiences of others, each community must take this journey on their own. But the 5 Ps can provide the context for this.

C. Invitational Education

It is no coincidence that when Alexander the Great began his world domination, one of the first things he did was change the education system in the nation he had just conquered. Hitler’s Youth program was based on the same premise: if you want to change a culture, focus your energy and attention on the education of the next generation. If your world empire endures the 20 years it takes for those children to become adults, your empire is likely to last, as the next generation, raised on the ideas that shape your culture, will become part of the culture-forming and culture-maintaining process. History is full of similar examples. Education matters.

This is one of the reasons I am excited about Invitational Educational theory, and why I think it is important for our community to have a firm grasp of our foundational theories. As many of us have experienced personally, a truly inviting community and authentic inviting relationships can be life-changing. William Purkey’s legacy is an enduring testimony to this transformative power.

I have found it quite interesting to note that invitational theory and invitational education are sometimes used interchangeably. There is a risk here, as it could potentially limit the application of the invitational approach in non-educational contexts. This is an important note, as invitational theory has been applied in workplaces, businesses, counselling centers, and medical and government offices. Invitational Educational theory is the theoretical foundation, while invitational education is by far the most common application of the theory-in-practice. But in the context of this paper, this connection is an essential one. If we want our students to become inviting

people who embody what an authentic democratic community could be, invitational education must play a central role in teaching students about the democratic vision and the significance of a democratic ethos or democratic community. Invitational theory applied to invitational education is perhaps the most obvious action plan of all. In this section I will explore several elements that link invitational education and a democratic community, (a) democratic education, (b) teach kids about democracy, (c) position kids to experience and reflect on the democratic process, and (d) the lived experience will never be forgotten.

a. Democratic Education: Franklin Roosevelt (1938) once said that "Democracy cannot succeed unless those who express their choice are prepared to choose wisely. The real safeguard of democracy, therefore, is education" (para 4). Similarly, Mursell (1955) observed that "The governing purpose of education in a democratic society is to support, perpetuate, enlarge, and strengthen the democratic way of life" (p. 3). Education can play a key role in a democracy, and there is an important opportunity for dialogue between the inviting tradition and the democratic education community. As Collins, Hess, and Lowery (2019) observe, "In a democratic approach, schools provide students with a safe, risk-free place to practice democratic skills and the opportunities to learn how to develop and implement critical thinking and constructive conversations" (p. 2). Similarly, Furman and Shields (2005) describe "the practices of deep democracy in schools, involving participation in deep democratic processes by all members of the school in the interest of the common good" (p. 122). The Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development (ASCD) identified four central elements of democratic education, *freedom*, *discussion*, *involvement*, and *equality* (ASCD, 2018). Drawing on these elements, teachers can help students learn about both the democratic vision and democratic practice, and, as importantly, can position them to experience democratic practices in their schooling.

Collins, Hess, and Lowery (2019) completed a study of how teachers establish and sustain democracy and education in their classrooms. This paper begins with an important problem, noting that "educators generally know *the what* and *the why* of democratic education; nevertheless, *the how* seems to be underrepresented in classroom practices" (p. 2). Their study generated five findings that should inform democratic education, (1) fostering relationships, (2) empowering students, (3) teaching and using democratic skills, (4) a democratic educative structure, and (5) democratic teacher practices. Invitational educators who seek to draw on democratic education in

developing an invitational classroom or school are encouraged to take a closer look at this valuable study.

b. Teach Kids About Democracy: An obvious implication for invitational education that seeks to draw on a democratic ethos foundation is to teach children about democracy. This includes casting the democratic vision and describing the democratic ideal, but it also includes discussing and assessing the practice of democracy, including the limits and challenges that have emerged in our society, and throughout human history. This could have some intriguing implications for history, social studies, and literature lessons and activities. Novak, Armstrong, and Browne (2014) point out that "Democratic community and social justice are important concerns for theorists and practitioners due to glaring economic and academic gaps between dominant and minoritized students, growing pluralism, and the need to prepare all students to participate in democratic processes" (p. 23).

A key aspect of the democratic vision that resonates with invitational education is the importance of other-oriented thinking, and the need to value and appreciate the unique lived experience and voice of others. This could provide rich fodder for a conversation about why the democratic practices matter and might have an impact on individuals and on society at large. Here, too, the potential for a literature or social studies lesson and assignment that positions students to recognize how different people can be, and how important it is to develop receptive empathy to try to understand how someone else sees the world. This framework resonates with many current educational approaches and initiatives (social and emotional learning, multicultural education, culturally responsive pedagogy, etc.). If students can learn to appreciate the significance, value, and complexity of the democratic ideal and democratic practices, they will be well-positioned to consider the role they could play in a diverse, pluralistic, multicultural society. Collins and her colleagues (2019) note that "Mursell (1955) argued that if schools embodied dynamic programs that informed students about contemporary problems and how to experience the realities of democratic living, then it would be an 'effective social instrument for the perpetuation and furtherance of democracy' (p. 147)" (p. 9).

c. Position Kids to Experience and Reflect on the Democratic Process: But it is not enough to learn about democracy, and about the democratic vision or ideal. Students must also experience it directly in their education. As noted earlier, this is a key challenge to be addressed: many teachers have the WHAT and WHY of democratic education figured out, but struggle when

it comes to the HOW. Collins and her colleagues (2019) note that "a democratic approach to education engages students in building a strong classroom community, taking responsibility in cocreating curriculum, and engaging in critical dialogue on issues that impact their lives" (p. 1).

A key part of this lived experience is the type of learning community developed in the classroom. Such a community must be learning-centered, of course. But it should also be a democratic community, which Dewey (1916) suggests "makes provision for participation in its good of all its members on equal terms" (p. 99). If students experience this type of community during their years in school, the lived experience of being part of such a community is likely to endure for a lifetime. Purkey and Novak (2016) cast a powerful vision, noting that "Invitational Education reflects this Democratic Ethos by emphasizing deliberative dialogue, mutual respect, and the important of shared activities" (p. 7).

Is it also important to provide students with the opportunity to identify, develop, and practice the skills they will need to be a positive and contributing member of a democratic community. They also need the opportunity to reflect on their skills development, and to receive feedback about their success and growth. As Collins, Hess, and Lowery (2019) point out, "Within these democratic communities, it is important for educators to both teach students how to participate in a democracy with the skills needed for participation while at the same time provide a space for students to use these skills" (p. 6).

Transparency about rationale and purpose should also be a regular part of a democratic education. Teachers should regularly remind their students about why they are doing what they are doing, providing natural and authentic opportunities to cast a vision for the democratic ideal (e.g., we want you to learn to value others, to seek out their voices, to try to understand where they are coming from, etc.). Students should have regular opportunities to reflect on their experiences in this context as well.

d. The Lived Experience Will Never be Forgotten: The potential educative impact of the democratic ethos is an essential distinction to draw. It matters because the lived experience of being valued and valuing others is life shaping, even transformational. Breathing the air of an authentically democratic ethos establishes rhythms and patterns that may never be forgotten, even if the student experiences non-democratic practices after they graduate (like an autocratic or toxic workplace). Having "breathed the air" of a community characterized by a democratic vision, even

that adult is likely to long and aspire for more. Some may be courageous enough to become the change they want to see in the world.

A key aspect of this lived experience is the intentional emphasis on teaching students to be both self-directed and other-oriented. Self-concept theory reminds us that self-perception is foundational to human belief and behavior. Perceptual theory reminds us that how an individual perceives others and their community context will also exercise a formative impact. As Collins, Hess, and Lowery (2019) note,

> The theme of democratic structure speaks to creating spaces in which students experience and exercise their own personal freedoms as citizens and individuals. Democratic education is necessary for preparing citizens who can interact in meaningful ways within a free democratic society. As students practice citizenry, they learn that being empowered does not mean disenfranchising others but is a collaborative process that addresses common concerns and challenges for all social classes and backgrounds (Dewey, 1916; Freire, 1970). (p. 9)

Conclusion – Linking Back, Looking Beyond

One of the things I have appreciated about the process of researching and writing this essay is how powerfully a democratic ethos or community can shape and inform invitational practice. A community where everyone matters and where we all need to figure out how to live and work together is a powerful life-learning opportunity. But there is a neat reciprocity as well: the inviting tradition provides an important context for serving as a member of a democratic community and culture, given the emphasis on both self-direction and other-oriented thinking and living. In this final section I would like to link back to invitational theory, then look beyond the inviting tradition.

Linking back to Invitational Theory

Invitational Theory is not a new theory. It has been around for decades, and it has demonstrated that it has staying power. Indeed, I am often struck by how much this theoretical perspective resonates with current initiatives and theories both inside and outside of education. Three key elements of the inviting tradition stand out in this regard, (1) Invited into flourishing and wellbeing, (2) the importance of perceptions, and (3) the need to be intentionally inviting.

1. Invited into flourishing and wellbeing: What I appreciate most about invitational theory is that it is both *idealistic* and *realistic*. It is firmly rooted in an unwavering and unconditional

confidence in the capacity and potential of human beings. People are amazing and are capable of amazing things. But they are also flawed; they can make mistakes and bad choices. The potential for both amazing and not-so-amazing are both constantly and simultaneously possible. And this is what makes the inviting approach so essential. Someone with an inviting stance can believe in the possibility for others to be amazing and to do amazing things. And they can recognize that people will sometimes disappoint or cause harm. At the heart of invitational theory is the conviction that, when obstacles and challenges are addressed, every single human being can make wise and appropriate choices. The inviting approach truly invites people into flourishing and wellbeing. The model is built upon the firm conviction that people are able, valuable, and responsible, and should be treated accordingly.

2. The Importance of Perceptions: Perceptual theory reminds us that human behavior is a symptom of perception. The way a person looks at the world shapes how they act in the world. Self-concept theory reminds us that the most fundamental perception is one's self-concept, or their perception-of-self. Paying attention to perceptions is clearly a foundational element of the inviting tradition. How someone looks at themselves shapes who they are and how they act. How someone looks at others profoundly shapes how they respond to and interact with the people around them. In this context, a number of important perceptions need to be considered: *self-as-significant*, *self-as-invited*, *self-as-inviting*, *others-as-significant*, *others-as-invited*. These perceptions should shape and inform the application of invitational theory, and they have obvious implications for the formation of an inviting democratic community.

3. The need to be Intentionally inviting: When I was first introduced to invitational theory, it was the distinction between *intentionally* and *unintentionally* inviting and disinviting that caught my attention. I had met teachers who were unintentionally disinviting (indeed, I had been perceived as such a teacher by some of my students, too, which piqued my interest in perceptual theory!). I had also met teachers who were unintentionally inviting, good people who did good things, but who were not as transparent or intentional about it as they could have been, which limited their impact. The focus on intentionality, transparency, and steadfast determination that is implied by the need to be intentionally inviting is a game-changer. And this will certainly be the case when it comes to the development of an inviting democratic community. It is not just that we invite others into community, but that the receiver perceives themselves to have been invited, a perception that could shift their behavior. Perceptions of self and others do not exist for their own

sake, but to be activated and engaged for the sake of relationships and community. As Purkey and Novak (2015) remind us, "inviting is an ethical process involving continuous interactions among and between human beings" (p. 1).

Looking beyond Invitational Theory

I am excited about the potential for a democratic ethos or community to inform the practice of invitational theory. But I am also excited about the potential for a democratic vision to have a shaping impact on society. Democracy is at risk. But the democratic ideal contains the seeds for hope and change. In conclusion, I would like to consider four powerful implications, (1) the potential of democratic education, (2) the need for courage and humility, (3) taking a stand on ideals and principles, and (4) the need to be both self-directed and other-oriented.

1. Potential of Democratic Education: Prior to preparing and writing this paper I did not know much about democratic education. Entering into the democratic education literature was an exciting opportunity. As noted above, while I am excited that the democratic ideal and a democratic community can exert a powerful shaping impact on invitational practice, I am also intrigued and excited about the potential for democratic education to exercise a shaping impact on society. As Dewey (1916) pointed out, "democracy has to be born anew every generation, and education is its midwife" (p. 139).

2. The Need for Courage and Humility: One of the most important lessons a human being needs to learn in order to commit to being part of a community that earnestly seeks wellbeing and flourishing for others is that "it is not about you." The egocentrism of childhood needs to be left behind, and a commitment to other-oriented thinking and living must emerge as a priority. This is not easy. Indeed, many adults struggle to take this important step. The economic and advertising messaging that bombard us daily feed this flawed self-perception. Maintaining a healthy sense of self and a healthy sense of others demands courage and humility, often acting in defiance of our natural, conditioned inclinations.

3. Taking a Stand on Ideals and Principles:The democratic vision and a commitment to the inviting stance demand that people take a stand on ideals and principles. This is not easy. But it is possible. And in this context, the democratic ideal (moving from what *is* to what *should be*) is a firm foundation to build on. We need to challenge ourselves (and those around us) to live out the theory of the ideal in our embodied practice; in our actions, behaviors and dispositions. This means

being willing to ask tough questions, to advocate for others, to invite silenced voices, to think critically and creatively, and to be willing to challenge the status quo.

4. The Need to be Both Self-Directed and Other-Oriented: Two interconnected themes consistently emerged in this essay, one from invitational theory (*everyone matters*) and one from the democratic ethos literature (*we need to learn to live together*). This combination cuts to the heart of the development of an inviting democratic community. We need to earnestly believe that every single person matters. And we need to be earnestly committed to learning how to live and work together. People are amazing. But they can also be annoying, mean, and stubborn. We need a theoretical framework that allows us to push past this, to be both idealistic and realistic at the same time. And this requires that we be both self-aware and self-directed, and other-aware and other-oriented. Because everyone matters. And we need to learn how to live together.

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