

The Evolution of Invitational Education: From POP to TOP

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William Purkey, the originator and proponent extraordinaire for Invitational Education is no longer with us. He died in his ninety-fifth year; still actively working to engage educators with the challenge to create inviting schools while living flourishing lives. This was his educational passion, and he wanted it to live on in others' hearts, minds, and actions. One way to honor such an educational professor is to take seriously his ideas and be able to speak to, with, and for their deeper aspirations and long-term impact. Here is a brief look at the life and work of Dr. William Purkey as he moved from pronouncements to theory.

Anybody who met Dr. Purkey quickly realized he oozed serious and creative optimism. Like the abolitionist Theodore Parker and the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, William Purkey was convinced that “the arc of the moral universe is long but bends toward justice.” This results in the awakening of human potential to build a better world for all. Sure, he realized that there can be ups and downs, but with serious and creative thought education could win out over ignorance, kindness could overcome mean-spiritedness. This is no pie-in-the sky speculation but a call for sustained actions that can change the quality of people's lives.

Purkey's challenge for sustained action was taken up by educators far and wide through the International Alliance for Invitational Education, which Purkey established with the late Dr. Betty Siegel, former President of Kennesaw State University. Annual World Conferences, awards for schools around the globe, international educational exchange programs, speakers giving invited keynote addresses, the I-Cort focus in Australian schools, books, articles, and dissertations, along with the Hong Kong Alliance for Invitational Education have perpetuated the growth of the inviting school movement. Certainly, Invitational Education has grown, but there is more that needs to be done if this aspiration is to live up to its claim to be an evolving theory of practice. Let's look at its early stages and the move to principled action.

The inviting school movement developed in flights and perchings; exhibited by periods of innovation along with time for these advances to settle in. In 1970, Purkey wrote the book, *Self-*

Concept and School Achievement, which showed that there is a stable and persistent relationship between feeling good about oneself as a learner and performing well in school. This excited some educators and tapped into their basic intuitions and experiences in classrooms. Purkey was on to something. As a result of his book and his exemplary and engaging speaking style he found himself being invited to give talks all over North America and beyond. For more than fifty years Purkey was a hot item on the speakers' circuit. He also was a model for other educators regarding how to speak up for bringing more joy to classrooms and schools.

But William Purkey was not satisfied with only the spoken word. He was a man of action. He wanted to know what could be done with this research about self-concept and school achievement. During that time, research on teacher expectations was also drawing a lot of attention. Teachers who were told that some students would blossom in a school year, and, lo and behold, found these students blooming all over the place. However, the students were selected at random. The blooming prediction was contrived. Gulp!

Something else had to be happening. This something else was called *expectations*. All kinds of unsubstantiated claims were made about the power of expectations to change the world. Purkey noted, however, that expectations could not just be in someone's head. If they were to work, they had to be communicated by actions. He later called these positive actions invitations, and the rest is history. Well, not quite. The research on teacher expectations was challenged by many researchers and the connection between self-concept and school achievement was correlational but causal. You cannot say which caused which. What to do if you were a man of action as was William Purkey?

Purkey possessed a persistent and profound simplicity in looking at research on human behavior. Stepping back, he realized that treating students in respectful ways was worthwhile in itself. If it connected with school achievement, that is wonderful, but in a democratic society it was obligatory to treat people in respectful ways. This subtle but revolutionary pivot led to the first Pronouncement of Purkey [POP]: "People are valuable, able and responsible and should be treated accordingly." That was followed by other POPs: one proclaimed that people's behavior is never neutral, it either called forth or shunned human potential; another stated that what people did was either intentional or unintentional. This led to *The Ladder--the Four Levels of Professional Functioning*. In addition, Purkey noted that messages were not only sent by people directly but were also transmitted through places, programs, policies, and processes. This was the development

of The Five Ps. Conveyed messages were either invitations or disinvitations. This changed the discussion from talking about expectations to suggesting how teachers could express intentional invitations in their classrooms. These invitations were described in the First Edition of *Inviting School Success* in 1978. Thereafter, Purkey and others went out and about promoting ways to make schools the most “inviting place in town.”

With the Four Levels of Four Levels of Professional Functioning and the Five Ps, Purkey provided a general plan for improving classrooms. However, it was time to backfill. For example, intuitions and pronouncements of one person could only go so far. Purkey was the originator of the concept of inviting school success. So, he got things going. He provided a lay of the land, but invited others to explore and expand it with him, and after him. He saw that his pronouncements may have been a necessary first step but were inherently limited.

Intellectually, what was needed was a way to explain the relationship between his intuitive pronouncements and the philosophical, ethical, and psychological ideas used to explain and justify the inviting approach. It is here where Purkey’s pronouncements were translated to philosophical thought, where intuitions were grounded and concepts extended into a theory of practice [TOP]. In the 1980s Purkey got comfortable with the notion of a theory of practice. This was around the time the International Alliance for Invitational Education was formed and the Second Edition of *Inviting School Success* came out. It should be noted, however, this edition also had hundreds of suggestions for educators in its indexes. Purkey thought theory might be important for professors of education but providing examples of ways to be inviting at different grade levels is often more important for classroom teachers who are often bombarded by vague abstractions and turned off by theoretical language.

“Show me a good practice,” they often say, “and we’ll watch you for a while and decide if we wish to explore more of what you are suggesting.”

“Fair enough,” we’d answer, “But if you want to go beyond pronouncements, we need to work together on common principles from which to operate.” An invitational education theory of practice [TOP] works to do this.

So, what is the essence of an invitational education theory of practice?

An invitational education theory of practice [TOP] centers on the messages considered, sent, received, interpreted, acted upon, and evaluated in school settings and beyond. This is the currency whereby an inviting approach works. Such a currency, however, needs a foundational

backing for making defensible philosophical, psychological, and interpersonal inroads into educators' thoughts and practices. So, Purkey worked with others to conceptualize the three foundations of Invitational Education: The Democratic Ethos; The Perceptual Tradition; and Self-Concept Theory. Here is an abbreviated form of what they came up with:

- Democratic Ethos: Extend the ideal that everyone matters;
- Perceptual Tradition: Interpret behavior from the inside-out;
- Self Concept Theory: Work with the inbuilt motivational energies of people.

Understanding these three foundations provides a moral purpose, a psychological perspective, and a rationale for working with a person's fundamental motivation. It takes time to internalize these principles, but by using them educators have helped develop principled strategies for personal and professional relationships, conflict resolution, philosophical discussions, and invitational change. More are needed to deal with developing technologies and their alternatives. What William Purkey had done with his initial pronouncements was to establish a framework for "making schools the most inviting place in town." He is the one who had the basic insight and relentless energy, so he could proclaim what was needed to be done at the time. He laid down a way to talk about inviting school success. Even he could not foresee what the theory would grow into: POP would turn into TOP. The rest is history. Thank you, William, for helping to make better schools and better lives for its stakeholders.

If you find yourself using a Purkey quotation, thank you for keeping William's energy and insights alive. But, be careful. Some years ago, while speaking in a small southern US town, I used the Purkey line, "Schools should be the most inviting place in town. More inviting than McDonalds, more inviting than Wendy's, more inviting than the First Baptist Church."

Well, the pastor of that town's First Baptist Church phoned its school board to voice that he was not amused by my suggestion. So, beware. It is easy to be unintentionally disinventing. We must be mindful to be intentionally inviting so our TOP will help optimize human potential.

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