

Exploring the Invitational Impact of Participation in an Inclusive Post-Secondary Academy

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Abstract

This qualitative study explored the impact of participation in an inclusive post-secondary Academy's learning opportunities. The Academy intentionally utilized the Invitational Theory and Practice (ITP) framework. During the study, Academy mentors and faculty members highlighted their experiences and described the ways they created an intentionally inviting environment that positively supported the learning opportunities for post-secondary students with diverse intellectual or developmental abilities. Examination of the Academy's people, places, policies, programs, and processes through the five elements: intentionality, care, optimism, respect, and trust (I-CORT), confirmed implementation of the ITP framework impacted the Academy's attainment of overarching goals, including a positive institutional climate and student satisfaction with learning opportunities.

Introduction

Participation in post-secondary inclusive learning opportunities is rapidly increasing across university campuses (Stodden, Whelley, Chang, & Harding, 2001). These programs give students with diverse intellectual or developmental abilities opportunities to earn certificates or other recognition when they do not meet the university requirements for admission as degree-seeking students. Post-secondary inclusive learning programs provide support systems that typically include mentors and the guidance of faculty members who equip students with tools for success. These programs are on the rise because they are making a difference in students' lives as they provide the benefits of university educational experiences.

This study focuses on an inclusive post-secondary opportunity in an Academy that went beyond typical expectations to provide students with a kaleidoscope of opportunity. Mentors were consistently available for assistance, and faculty members were highly innovative in a program that presented opportunities within and beyond the typical classroom. Within an Academy of a major university in the Southeast, this inclusive program aligned with the overarching goals, elements, and domains of Invitational Theory and Practice (Purkey & Novak, 2016; Shaw & Siegel, 2010; Shaw, Siegel, & Schoenlein, 2013).

Review of the Literature

An invitational school is a welcoming, student-centered educational environment (Purkey & Novak, 2016). The interviews and focus groups during this study consistently demonstrated the ways mentors and faculty members within the Academy created a welcoming environment that was supportive of students. Throughout the interviews of this study there were many links between

Invitational Education and the comments made by mentors and faculty members who were working for the Academy.

Invitational Education

As a theory of practice, Invitational Education (IE) is “designed to create and enhance human environments that cordially summon people to realize their potential in all areas of worthwhile human endeavor” (Purkey & Novak, 2016, p. vii). IE “is an imaginative act of hope that explains how human potential can be realized. It identifies and changes the forces that defeat and destroy people” (p. vii)” IE recognizes five domains: people, places, policies, programs, and processes, that comprise “everyone and everything in an organization...(that) will either build or destroy intellectual, social, physical, emotional, and moral potential for stakeholders” (p.vii).

Invitational Theory and Practice

Invitational Theory and Practice (ITP) “is viewed as the overarching theory for the base paradigm known as Invitational Education (IE)” (Shaw, Siegel, & Schoenlein, 2013, p. 30). The authors emphasized the ways Invitational Theory and Practice (ITP) “addresses the total culture/environment of an organization to provide a more welcoming, satisfying, and enriching experience for all involved” (p. 34). They also noted that “ITP focuses on increasing the authentically personal and professional verbal and non-verbal messages that seek to bring forth the best of human potential through trust, respect, optimism, and intentionality” (p. 34). As such, Invitational Education and Invitational Theory and Practice aligns directly with the comments made by mentors and faculty members during interviews and focus groups. Academy mentors and faculty worked to add to the potential of students and helped them actualize their potential in creative and meaningful ways.

Methodology

This qualitative interview study was designed to determine the impact of participating in the Academy’s inclusive post-secondary program. Interviews and focus groups were the primary means of data collection. Typological data analysis (Hatch, 2002) helped codify the overarching themes.

Participants

Academy faculty and mentors who worked directly with students in the inclusive program shared their experiences and insights during the interviews and focus groups for this study. These faculty members and mentors provided ongoing support and guidance for non-degree seeking students auditing typical university courses. The courses of this program, featured social integration, training for life, and career exploration. The program resulted in a Certificate of Social Growth and Development.

The Academy mentors were degree-seeking students who were hired to provide ongoing support. The mentors assisted students in the program with various supports and accommodations, including, note-taking during class, proofreading homework assignments, or reading test items aloud. The Academy mentors also assisted students with daily challenges, such as purchasing books. Mentors were professionally prepared for these roles through extensive training at the beginning of each semester and monthly refresher sessions. Students were matched with mentors

in relation to availability and personality. During each semester, students chose to audit university classes according to their interests and goals. Specific faculty members worked within the Academy and developed individualized success plans in collaboration with the inclusive program's students to provide high interest, meaningful learning experiences.

For clarity throughout our discussion, the degree-seeking Academy mentors will be referred to as mentors. The university faculty members, who were teaching the classes attended by students in the inclusive program, will be referred to as faculty or faculty members. The students attending the Academy for post-secondary inclusive learning opportunities, will be referred to as students.

Data Collection

Interview questions and focus group questions served as the basis for data collection. They were designed to encourage participants to freely express their perceptions and feelings about the impact of participating in a post-secondary inclusive program. Interviews and focus groups progressed from general "grand tour questions" (Spradley, 2016), such as a description of a typical day, to more specific questions about their experiences. Open-ended interview questions gave participants opportunities to share their feelings in their own words.

Focus group questions were designed to corroborate statements from interviews to give participants opportunities to elaborate on certain issues that were emphasized during interviews. The semi-structured format provided the opportunity to follow leads from statements made by participants (Van Manen, 1990). These follow-up questions elicited rich descriptions, which provided a more complete picture of the lived experiences of the participants.

Data Analysis

Hatch's typological model (2002) provided the framework for data analysis from multiple perspectives (Glesne, 2015; Patton, 2014). Initial categorization of the data into typologies was followed by repeated readings, line-by-line analysis, and color-coding of the

data using *Microsoft Word*. This analysis was ongoing and utilized the nine steps for data analysis designed by Hatch (2002). According to Hatch (2002) typological analysis should only be used if the categories for analysis are evident. At the beginning of data analysis, it became evident that the data aligned with the assumptions, five elements, and five domains of Invitational Theory and Practice (Purkey & Novak, 2016).

Regularities and common characteristics in the responses of participants quickly emerged in a review of the data pattern analysis. As these semantic relationships emerged, they revealed patterns that were suggested in the research literature. These semantic relationships served as links in the data set and provided elaborations on these ideas from the literature. During this codifying process, charts listing relevant data helped identify the integrating concepts that ran through this data.

Color-coded *Post-it flags* were used to label the patterns within the typologies as they were recorded in relation to the specific codes for the participants. To record integrating concepts that ran through the data, stars were used to highlight powerful quotes to facilitate the selection of specific data to support generalizations from these patterns. Throughout these steps, the

typological model designed by Hatch (2002) continued to provide the framework that illuminated the process of data analysis.

Results

Based on the findings of this qualitative study, this section focuses on the ways that the Academy went beyond typical expectations to intentionally invite students to access a kaleidoscope of opportunities for success. This section describes specific ways in which the Academy's inclusive program at a major university in the Southeast aligned with the overarching assumptions, elements, and domains of Invitational Theory and Practice (Purkey, & Novak, 2016; Shaw & Siegel, 2010; Shaw, Siegel, & Schoenlein, 2013). These results reflect patterns identified across the study's interviews and focus group sessions.

Invitational Education (IE) presents the idea that “everyone has the ability and responsibility to function in a personally and professionally inviting manner” (Purkey & Novak, 2016, p. 23). An intentionally inviting level of functioning creates a dependable stance that “increases the likelihood that a cordial summons will be accepted and acted upon (Purkey & Novak, 2016, p. 24). Implementation of an IE mindset impacts an organization's climate. Analyzing and improving each of the five Domains of Invitational Education theory: People, Places, Policies, Programs, and Processes, “within a framework of the five elements of IE: Intentionality, care, optimism, respect, and trust (I-CORT), systemically transforms the whole school” (Purkey & Novak, 2016, p. 22). The results of this study found alignment between what is done during the Academy's inclusive program and the five domains and five elements of IE. The next section will highlight results of the study and discuss the impact of alignment with IE theory and practices.

Overarching Goals of Invitational Education

Implementation of Invitational Education theory and practices authentically creates and sustains welcoming learning environments. The systemic framework practices intentionality, care, optimism, respect, and trust (I-CORT). The goal is to promote “increased learning outcomes and personal growth” (Shaw, Siegel, & Schoenlein, 2013, p. 33).

It was highly evident that these goals aligned with the approach of the mentors and faculty members who participated in this qualitative interview study. They collaborated carefully and consistently to assist students within the framework of the program. They regularly shared innovations for note-taking and other procedures to enhance success as they attended classes with students in an inclusive program that opened opportunities within and beyond the classroom.

Monitoring the five Domains of IE, or powerful ‘5 Ps,’ helps ensure a warm and inviting atmosphere (Purkey & Novak, 2016; Shaw & Siegel, 2010). The elements of Invitational Education pair with these domains to intensify the power and significance of each domain (Shaw, Siegel, & Schoenlein, 2013). The impact of these components in a post-secondary inclusive program was a kaleidoscope of opportunity that resulted in beautiful patterns of support and successful achievement. The following section describes the ways mentors and faculty members effectively collaborated with students through assimilation of IE domains and elements to ensure students' comfort, appropriate challenges, and success in the inclusive program.

People and Optimism

Invitational Education focuses on people and the importance of individuals for a successful educational experience (Purkey & Novak, 2016). The optimism expressed by individuals help make a school intentionally inviting by encouraging everyone involved. Optimism and enthusiasm for the program were highly evident during the interviews. The Academy mentors and faculty consistently conveyed an optimistic perspective. As indicated previously, they were available for assistance and helped students think through plans for learning most effectively. They considered the assets of each student and promoted the development of those assets using creativity and attention to details.

Places and Trust

Invitational Education acknowledges the importance of providing an aesthetic, pleasant, and comfortable physical learning environment, which nurtures growth (Purkey & Novak, 2016). Schools augment the benefits of this pleasant environment when leaders establish trustworthy patterns of interaction. These interactions are based on reliability, genuineness, truthfulness, competence, and knowledge (Arceneaux, 1994; Purkey & Novak, 2016). The Academy's mentors and faculty members worked from the beginning to establish trust and a pleasant rapport with students. The university itself is a safe, pleasant, and caring environment in which students feel comfortable. This inclusive program is an extension of the atmosphere of trust, which extends the basic needs for a safe and caring environment (Maslow, 1943) to the next level.

Mentors discussed ways they collaborated with the students and provided support and guidance as needed to help students feel comfortable and well-adjusted to campus life. For instance, a student was having challenges with being late to class. The student's Academy mentor discussed strategies to prepare for each day and alternatives for placing the alarm clock to help the student consistently arrive to class on time. This created a more comfortable learning environment that fostered success. This was typical of the sessions in which mentors and faculty members collaboratively discussed ways to identify problems and seek effective solutions. Intentionally inviting further discussions led to more solutions that empowered students to experience success in relation to the post-secondary inclusive program's class schedule and the learning environment.

Policies and Respect

Invitational Education emphasizes the importance of documenting policies and exhibiting consistency for the benefit of everyone in the program. Purkey and Novak (2016) described policies as "critical 'semantic webs' that influence the deep-seated structure of any school" (p. 21). The design of the Academy's policies intentionally reflects care, optimism, respect, and trust (I-CORT). Respectful of students and their families' need for access, policies are clearly stated on the university website, allowing anyone interested in the Academy's inclusive program to access the same information. The Academy's mentors and faculty adhere to these policies to maximize opportunities for the post-secondary inclusive program's students.

Programs and Care

Programs that embrace Invitational Education theory and practices can be "formal or informal, curricular, or extra-curricular. It is important for educators to ensure that all the school's programs work for the benefit of everyone and that they encourage active engagement with

significant content” (Purkey & Novak, 2016, p. 21). The Academy features a highly student-centered inclusive program designed to show care for each student. Academy mentors and faculty members described the ways they intentionally emphasized care to design learning experiences that connected with students’ interests. The entire program is designed to help students maximize their learning and engage with significant content in meaningful ways. For instance, when mentors attend class with the students in the inclusive program, they exhibit care to sit in places that empowers the students’ feeling of independence. Yet, the mentors intentionally remain vigilantly available to support an optimal learning experience before, during, and after class.

Processes and Intentionality

As a process for defining school climate, Invitational Education encourages a Democratic Ethos to feature “collaborative and cooperative procedures and continuous networking stakeholders” (Purkey & Novak, 2016, p. 22). Intentionality in the design of these processes emphasizes the value and boundless potential of each individual (Novak, Rocca, & DiBiase, 2006). Systemic processes intentionally reflect care, optimism, respect, and trust (I-CORT) to actualize that fullest potential of a collaborative atmosphere. These intentional processes encourage ongoing development of cooperative procedures with reciprocal benefits. The Academy’s processes and procedures carefully and intentionally promote independence and success among the post-secondary inclusive program’s students. Academy leaders intentionally orchestrate experiences to provide relevant and meaningful experiences within the student’s comfort zone, thereby promoting success without undue stress (Vygotsky, 1978).

Additional Insights

During this discussion of the study’s results, specific domains of Invitational Theory and Practice were paired with specific elements to demonstrate the alignment of these components with the study and the characteristics of the Academy. However, as noted above, the five Domains of IE: People, Places, Policies, Programs, and Processes, must interdependently interact within the I-CORT framework to “systemically transforms the whole school” (Purkey & Novak, 2016, p. 22). Each of the I-CORT elements align with the 5 Ps. In developing and evolving its inclusive program, the Academy actively and intentionally integrates and aligns the 5Ps through a framework of I-CORT, which provides a kaleidoscope of opportunities for success by the Academy’s students, mentors, and faculty.

All of the post-secondary inclusive program’s participants were enthusiastic about the Academy. The participants’ main suggestion was to communicate the Academy’s success to a wider community to reach potential candidates for the post-secondary inclusive program. They suggested contacting diverse organizations, for instance, to elicit whether Academy opportunities can be highlighted during a radio show, thereby helping others become familiar with the Academy’s post-secondary inclusive program that effectively utilizes Invitational Education theory and practices.

Conclusion

This qualitative study supports the belief that the Academy’s post-secondary inclusive education program naturally aligns with the domains and elements of Invitational Education theory and practices. The IE framework can be intentionally followed as the program continues to grow and evolve. Future programs can trust that IE theory and practices provide a framework for

promoting independence and successful achievement in post-secondary programs across university campuses. Implementation of the domains and elements of Invitation Education theory and practices will enhance the quality and benefits of educational programs. Specifically, post-secondary inclusive programs utilizing IE theory to guide or transform the 5 Ps through the implementation of I-CORT elements will positively impact diverse learners and their families as future opportunities for a university education are actualized. The Academy's systemic success opens significant doors for students as they enhance their careers and prepare to contribute to society in meaningful and satisfying ways.

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