

Democratic Ethos

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The democratic ethos lies at the base of the foundations of invitational education. The other foundations, the use of the perceptual approach to understand people and self-concept theory to focus on the uniqueness of individuals, are built on the primacy of a commitment to the idea that everyone matters. With this in mind, the inviting approach is a part of a larger ethical project that attempts to call forth the possibilities of people leading more fulfilling lives. This deep-seated ethical commitment enables Invitational Education to go beyond the fad-of-the-month programs that are incessantly thrown at educators and focus on what really matters: people and their potential to lead fulfilling lives.

And so, the heart of the inviting approach to school success is not a series of techniques for getting students to perform better on high stakes tests, although it often has that effect. It is not a way to get people to feel good about themselves no matter what they do, although it has a self-concept focus that emphasizes the importance of positive and realistic self-talk. It is not a public relations wake-up call to get people mobilized to talk to the media about the good things that are happening in their school, although it can certainly help organize such efforts. Rather, 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 through being involved in doing-with relationships. Deep down, a commitment to the inviting approach is a commitment to the basic notion that all people matter and individuals and communities have a right to participate in deciding the principles, policies, and practices that guide their lives. This is a deep sense of the concept of democracy that goes beyond the conventions of voting for representatives in public elections and forming and participating in political parties.

Important as these conventions can be, they are only one way of putting into practice the ideal that everyone matters. The democratic ethos, however, runs much deeper, not only in theory but in practice. It connects to the importance of attending to the communicating of messages that call forth human potential to live educational lives. This communicative sense of democracy has been an important concept for educators for more than a century. John Dewey emphasized the critical significance of communication in *Democracy and Education* (1916). 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. In addition, Dewey emphasized a commitment to democracy because it is the most educative form of governance. As people work to understand others, make their own thoughts public, and cooperate to create, implement, and evaluate imaginative approaches to shared problems, they grow personally, socially, and emotionally. This then can carry on to other parts of their life. A century later, Martha Nussbaum (2010) pointed out that without a commitment to understanding the complex issues of a pluralistic world and a commitment to understanding the perspectives of diverse people, our shared way of life will be shattered and human capabilities for leading fulfilling lives will be greatly limited.

Democratic practices are founded on open and free dialogue that promote social responsibility. As people communicate in a pluralistic society, they have to deal with an endless variety of individual perceptual worlds, unique self-concepts, and diverse cultural traditions. This requires social intelligence, which is the ability to use a variety of perspectives, to see things from the viewpoint of others, and to deal with the complexities and challenges of democratic living. The development of social intelligence leads to a stronger sense of collective responsibility—a sense and ideal that all are in it together.

Used as a guiding ideal, 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. Rather, ideals, as Robert Nozick (1989) indicated, should be judged on the basis of whether they enable people to attain more of what they consider to be of worth. A commitment to the democratic ethos is therefore a commitment to the conditions and processes that make understanding, mutual respect, and continuous dialogue possible. Thus a commitment to democratic practice and social justice are essential to inviting school success. For this communicative sense of democracy to work better, a psychology that shows respect for the person is necessary. The perceptual approach to persons fits that bill.