

Culturally Responsive Gifted Classrooms for Culturally Different Students

A Focus on Invitational Learning

Donna Y. Ford, PhD¹

Abstract: This article expands the notion of culturally responsive learning environments by including Purkey and Novak's (1996) work on invitational learning. Their typology of four types of schools is described and applied to gifted education classrooms, along with associated characteristics of each. Specific attention is focused on implications for Black and Hispanic students. The author maintains that all classrooms must be culturally responsive, which will help with recruiting and retaining culturally different students in gifted education.

Keywords: culturally responsive, culturally different, gifted classrooms

A few times a year, I dust off old books and articles to reflect upon where our field has progressed (or not) regarding being responsive to culturally different gifted students. Recently, in this process, I came upon the work of Purkey and Novak (1996) on Invitational Learning. Although not written with gifted students in mind, or even with culturally different students in mind, the work is relevant. In these pages, I summarize their work and draw implications for gifted education.

As I have noted for more than 20 years, gifted education has a long way to go regarding recruiting and retaining Black and Hispanic students in gifted education (Ford, 2013) and providing welcoming classrooms for them (Ford, 2005, 2010). Under-representation for both groups is large and pervasive—evident in the majority of states and school districts (Ford & King, 2014).

Under-representation for Black students hovers around 50% and for Hispanic students, it is approximately 40% in recent years.

When considering the dual goal of recruitment and retention, we must keep in mind the powerful impact of learning environments. Banks (2009) proposed that multicultural education has at least four components: (a) learning environment, (b) philosophy about working with culturally different students, (c) curriculum, and (d) instruction. Also important is including a focus on working with families and communities, and ensuring that

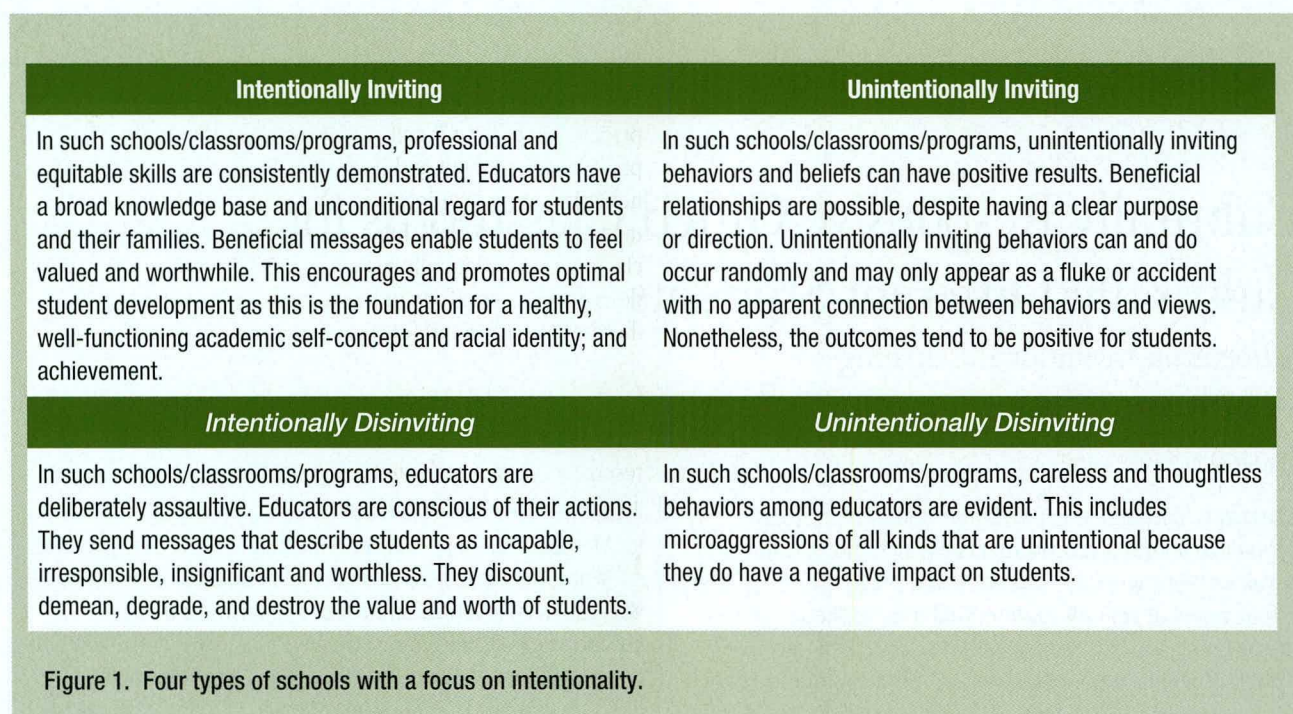
assessments are culturally responsive (Ford, 2011). Thus, as educators strive to recruit culturally different gifted students, they must also endeavor to retain them. This is where Invitational Learning (Purkey & Novak, 1996) comes into play. In inviting classrooms, the primary focus of education is for learners to demonstrate their academic achievement and personal potential. The concentration is on what a child can do and who the child is affectively, socially, culturally, and racially.

Fundamental Propositions of Invitational Learning

Undeniably, as Ellis (1990) noted, "Schools, like individuals, have 'personalities'; these self-validating and self-reinforcing characteristics do much to shape students' experience of school and their attitudes toward learning" (p. 1).

Likewise, invalidating experiences are impactful and have negative effects and outcomes on students. In this case, classrooms are culturally assaultive (Ford, 2011), and retaining under-represented students in gifted education will be difficult, which contributes to and increases under-representation (Ford, 2013).

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Invitational Learning (Purkey & Novak, 1966) consists of respect, trust, optimism, and intentionality. There is also a focus on how people, places, policies, programs, and processes (the 5 Ps) play a role in the educational outcomes of students (success or failure). The fundamental propositions of Invitational Learning are as follows:

1. *Respect*: Students are capable and valuable, and should be treated as such, regardless of their race, language, culture, income, and other socio-demographic backgrounds and characteristics.
2. *Trust*: Education should be a cooperative and collaborative experience whereby students share equal status. Students must trust their teachers to be caring and responsible professionals. Educators must trust that their students can achieve at high/higher levels despite trials and tribulations and differences associated with their culture.
3. *Optimism*: Educators recognize that students possess untapped potential in all meaningful human and humane endeavors. Optimism requires high and positive expectations for all students, regardless of race and cultural differences.
4. *Intentionality*: Students' potential can be recognized and realized by creating places, policies, processes, and programs specifically designed to invite optimal development. Educators must be *intentionally inviting*, and this conscious intent must be followed up with accountability (see pp. 50-55).

Characteristics of Inviting Educators

At the core of Purkey and Novak's (1966) model is the notion of being intentional or intentionality. Educators'

characteristics affect students' self-perceptions and affect all aspects of gifted classrooms. More specifically, beliefs and attitudes, along with expectations increase the probability of Black and Hispanic students' school success and experience in gifted education. According to Invitational Learning,

- Every student wants to be accepted and affirmed as valuable, capable, and responsible, and wants to be treated accordingly.
- Every student has the power to create beneficial self-messages. Because they have this power, they also have the responsibility to act on it.
- Every student's potential can best be realized in schools where services, programs, policies, and procedures are intentionally designed to invite optimal development, and where educators consistently and deliberately seek to realize this promise in their students.

Four Types of Schools and Classrooms

Classroom environments influence students' achievement and sense of belonging (Ford, 2005). Students who feel valued are likely to be motivated and engaged. Four types of schools and/or classrooms are described by Purkey and Novak (1966) with, as noted above, a focus on intentionality: "Intentionally Disinviting," "Intentionally Inviting," "Unintentionally Disinviting," "Unintentionally Inviting." This 2 x 2 typology is described below and appears in Figure 1.

Although I appreciate the reality that unintentionally inviting classrooms, schools, and programs can and do have positive outcomes for students, I am a strong advocate for being deliberate in efforts to be culturally responsive educators. Thus, intent does matter, especially in cases of social injustice (which

includes gifted education under-representation). Educators must be *intentional and deliberate* in creating classrooms that are not culturally assaultive to improve the educational experiences of culturally different gifted students—to retain them in gifted education (Ford, 2011, 2013).

The 5 Ps of Invitational Learning: People, Places, Policies, Programs, and Processes

I end this overview of Invitational Learning by focusing on the 5 Ps that play a role in students' successes or failures. Culturally different gifted students, so many of whom feel disconnected in classrooms, require and deserve the support (intentional support) of educators to be retained in gifted education and to avoid becoming underachievers (Ford, 2010).

People

Invitational educators value students for who they are as individuals and cultural beings—rather than for their achievements or abilities. They understand the needs of gifted students, in particular, students who are culturally different. Invitational educators advocate for and support students. This means providing opportunities for students to understand more about themselves and their needs, skills, abilities, and identities.

Places

Invitational educators foster classroom environments, so that culturally different gifted students feel valued and included. This improves retention. Attention to relationships and grouping practices is imperative to create and maintain learning environments that honor the dignity of culturally different students. A classroom and school atmosphere of positive regard is established for all, including those who differ from the mainstream and status quo.

Policies

Policies that recruit and retain culturally different students in gifted education support Invitational Learning. Policies that discriminate and contribute to under-representation do the opposite. To invite means to welcome. Discriminatory policies, intentional and unintentional (Ford, 2013), are antithetical to creating culturally responsive gifted classrooms, programs, and services.

Programs

Programs that encourage collaboration can be developed and maintained. They provide essential opportunities for students to pursue learning in their areas of interest and giftedness. When gifted education is inclusive and inviting, this can increase racial diversity and a sense of belonging among culturally different students.

Processes

Invitational Learning is culturally responsive; it includes compassion, empathy, and a focus on justice for students. This means that educators are intentional in supporting culturally different students with policies, procedures, and instruments.

Summary

A key feature of Invitational Learning is intentionality. Although unintentionally inviting gifted programs *may* result in positive outcomes for culturally different students regarding positive achievement and higher levels of retention, I cannot help but believe that intentionally inviting classrooms are the most beneficial overall. Intent matters. All students benefit when classrooms are culturally responsive (Ford, 2005, 2011). Being deliberate in our efforts to be culturally responsive should be the desired goal as professionals.

Conflict of Interest

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Bio

Donna Y. Ford, PhD, is a professor of special education at Vanderbilt University where she prepares teachers in gifted education, multicultural education, and working with students and families who live in poverty. She consults nationally on such topics and issues as under-representation and recruiting and retaining Black students in gifted and (Advanced Placement) AP classes, closing the achievement gap, and designing rigorous multicultural lesson plans. She is the editor of several books, including Multicultural Gifted Education and Reversing Underachievement Among Gifted Black Students, and numerous articles and book chapters. She has been a board of the National Association for Gifted Children and serves in various leadership positions for other organizations. She has received several awards for her work.

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