
Invitational Counselling: An Expanded Framework for Comprehensive School Counselling Programs

John J. Schmidt

East Carolina University

Abstract

This article presents an overview of invitational counselling, an approach to counselling based on self-concept theory, perceptual psychology, and invitational theory. The approach is encouraged as an expanded framework for designing comprehensive school counselling programs of services for students, parents, and teachers.

Résumé

Cet article présente une vue d'ensemble du conseil invitationnel, une méthode de counseling qui est basée sur la théorie du concept de soi, la psychologie perceptuelle, et la théorie invitationnelle. Cette méthode est recommandée dans les écoles, en tant que cadre plus large permettant de créer des programmes compréhensifs de services destinés aux étudiants, aux parents, et aux enseignants.

School counsellors offer a wide range of services to students, parents, and teachers. To assist counsellors in this effort, the school counselling profession has attempted to create models of comprehensive programs with which counsellors plan, organize, implement, and evaluate their services. At the same time, the professional literature has responded to this challenge with various philosophies, theories, and approaches for counsellors to use in helping students, parents, and teachers with personal and social development, educational planning, and career decisions. Ideally, school counsellors choose certain philosophies and approaches and integrate them into a comprehensive program of services.

Although school counsellors today help students, parents, and teachers face a wide range of challenging issues, their primary purpose remains as it was when school guidance and counselling began in the United States in the early 1900's. That purpose is to assist students with their educational development and career aspirations. Sometimes students' educational and career plans are inhibited due to social or personal difficulties that must be addressed if students are to experience success in schools. Therefore, the models and approaches selected by school counsellors may require an expanded view of professional helping that integrates efficacious developmental strategies as well as remedial counselling services.

It is understandable that school counsellors may find it difficult to decide what to do in any given situation or for an identified problem, particularly when students present broad concerns or exhibit complex behaviours. For this reason, school counsellors search for a framework by

which they can integrate compatible approaches into a comprehensive program of services.

One expanded approach that emphasizes an integrated view of helping relationships is invitational counselling, a model developed by Purkey and Schmidt (1987, 1990, 1996). Invitational counselling embraces a wide-angle vision of the services needed to meet the diverse challenges confronting today's students, parents, and teachers. At the same time, it encourages counsellors to move beyond the notion of alleviating immediate concerns towards the exploration of relatively boundless potential for future development.

Invitational counselling is founded on the assumptions of perceptual psychology, self-concept theory, and a new approach to understanding human interactions, called invitational theory (Purkey & Novak, 1996). Initially developed to help teachers improve classroom interactions and enhance student learning (Purkey, 1978), the invitational model has since been presented as a viable approach for the helping professions, especially counselling (Purkey & Schmidt, 1996; Stafford, 1992). The purpose of this article is to present invitational counselling as a framework for designing comprehensive school counselling programs. To begin, we focus on the foundations of the perceptual tradition, self-concept theory, and invitational theory.

FOUNDATIONS AND ASSUMPTIONS OF INVITATIONAL COUNSELLING

The perceptual tradition began with early philosophers who contemplated the existence of an inner consciousness. In more recent times, perceptually oriented theorists and practitioners have attempted to understand human development by examining the ways that people see themselves, others, and the world in which they live. Of all these perceptions, none is more important than the view people hold about themselves—the inner structure that has come to be known as the self-concept. Accordingly, self-concept is defined as “the totality of a complex and dynamic system of learned beliefs that an individual holds to be true about his or her personal existence and that gives consistency to his or her personality” (Purkey & Schmidt, 1996, p. 31).

By considering the power of human perception and the impact of self-concept on human development, invitational theory advocates a model of school counselling that incorporates beneficial human relationships, improved physical environments, and respectful systems in which students can thrive. As such, school counsellors who apply invitational counselling embrace these fundamental beliefs:

1. Every student wants to be accepted and affirmed as valuable, capable, and responsible, and wants to be treated accordingly.

2. Every person—students, parents, teachers, administrators, counsellors, and others—has the power to create beneficial messages to send to themselves and others, and because they have this power, they also have the responsibility.
3. Every student possesses relatively untapped potential in all areas of learning and human development.
4. Student potential can best be realized in schools where programs, policies, and processes are intentionally designed to invite optimal development, and where people consistently seek to realize this potential in themselves and others.

ELEMENTS OF INVITATIONAL COUNSELLING

Purkey (1978) initially developed the invitational approach by identifying four levels of functioning across a spectrum of helpful and harmful behaviours and encompassing a range of purposeful and accidental actions, called intentional and unintentional behaviours. By combining the concept of inviting and disinverting behaviours with the construct of intentionality, this approach suggests four continuous levels of functioning.

Levels of Functioning

I. *Intentionally Disinverting.* When students, parents, teachers, and others behave in purposefully harmful and destructive ways towards themselves and other people, they function at a least desirable level. When they send messages that describe people as irresponsible, incapable, and worthless, they demonstrate this lowest level of functioning. At this level, people intend to demean, degrade, and destroy the value and worth of themselves and others. On rare occasion, school counsellors act in intentionally disinverting ways, and become destructive and lethal forces in the lives of students, parents, and teachers who seek their assistance.

II. *Unintentionally Disinverting.* Sometimes harmful messages occur even when people do not intend them. For example, students who behave in careless and thoughtless ways may be perceived by teachers as being disinverting toward the school even though the students' intentions may more accurately be understood as a way of protecting their self-worth. Sometimes behaviours are ill-timed, poorly planned, misguided, or extravagant, and subsequently, messages may be misinterpreted, gestures viewed as offensive, or actions misunderstood. Nevertheless, as a result of these unintentional behaviours, negative outcomes happen. Although the harm is unintended, damage occurs nonetheless. According to this definition, school counsellors who are inconsistent, overzealous, disorganized, forgetful, and unreliable behave at an unintentionally harmful level.

III. *Unintentionally Inviting.* Occasionally students, parents, teachers, and counsellors observe positive results from their actions, even though they are uncertain what they did to achieve them. For instance, some school counsellors begin helping relationships with students without establishing a clear purpose and direction. They are unsure of where they are going, and lacking basic helping skills, unsure what they are doing. However, because these counsellors have good intentions, most of their relationships tend to be beneficial. One danger of functioning at this level is that a lack of knowing what one is doing makes it uncertain, and perhaps unlikely, that consistently effective counselling will be accomplished. This lack of consistency may prevent the school counsellor from repeating successful relationships. In contrast, counsellors who function at a high level of intentional practice are able to repeat their successes time and again for the benefit of students, parents, and teachers.

IV. *Intentionally Inviting.* Effective school counsellors reach for the highest level of professional functioning. They consistently demonstrate command of helping skills, a broad knowledge base, and unconditional regard for themselves and others. School counsellors who function at a high level of professional practice consistently create messages that enable their primary clients—students, parents, and teachers—to feel valued and worthwhile. At the same time, these beneficial messages encourage optimal human development by becoming the building blocks upon which to construct a healthy, well-functioning self-concept. Invitational counselling is founded on the belief that perception and self-concept are the combined forces that guide student development and successful school experiences.

Five Factors

In addition to the four levels of functioning, invitational counselling identifies five factors that contribute to, or detract from, student development. These five factors are: people, places, policies, programs, and processes. By way of summary, these conditions, individually and combined, function at one or more of the levels described above. It is easy to see how people behave at different levels of functioning, but it is less obvious how the other factors send positive or negative messages that influence student development. Policies that emphasize punitive approaches, such as regulations that fail students in courses after a certain number of absences, do little to encourage students and invite them to the celebration of learning. Places that are disrespectful, such as unclean or unsafe bathrooms in schools, dissuade students in subtle, yet powerful ways. Similarly, programs that neglect cultural or individual differences, or processes adopted for the convenience of an elite few, may be perceived as disinvitations by students, parents, and teachers who feel

slighted or set apart from the rest of the school population. Policies, places, programs, and processes, should be created and monitored so they enhance people's desire to participate and excel in school. An effective application of invitational counselling considers each of these factors and follows the axiom that says, "everything counts" in student development and learning.

Invitational counselling embraces the belief that there are essential elements and characteristics inherent in every beneficial relationship. For this reason, school counsellors who apply invitational counselling start from a professional stance consisting of optimism, trust, respect, and intentionality.

A Professional Stance

Invitational counselling begins with a particular stance that the school counsellor assumes regarding the school, students, parents, teachers, and the community as a whole. This stance consists of four essential elements that help to define and give clarity to the role and function of a school counsellor. The first of these elements is optimism.

Optimism. Seligman (1991) demonstrated that a positive perspective is essential for a successful life. "Optimists do better in school, succeed more at life tasks, and even age better and live longer. By being optimistic about themselves, they also are more optimistic about others" (Purkey & Schmidt, 1996, p. 7).

Invitational counselling starts with the assumption that healthy functioning people strive to be intimately involved in mutually beneficial and caring relationships. Consequently, what most students want is to be affirmed in their present worth while being invited to realize their full potential. When students exhibit behaviours that appear to contradict these assumptions, it is often a response to a school that has low expectations for students, or to school and home environments that offer only repeated negative experiences. As a result, students "have therefore lost respect for themselves, trust in their abilities, and faith in their potential" (Purkey & Schmidt, 1996, p. 7).

Optimism is also reflected in a school counsellor's confidence in working with students, parents, and colleagues to make a positive difference. At the same time, optimistic counsellors persevere through difficult circumstances and over seemingly immovable obstacles. In addition to helping maintain a positive attitude, confidence and perseverance also demonstrate respect for people and institutions with whom counsellors work.

Respect. No ingredient is more important in counselling relationships than respect for people. In school counselling, such respect includes sincere appreciation for the rich complexity of each student and the

cultural value brought to the school by every student, parent, and teacher served. As Purkey and Schmidt (1996) advised, "Being different is not a detriment; often diversity is a benefit to the entire group" (p. 8).

Responsibility is a related characteristic of a respectful relationship. In school counselling, this means that every student is ultimately responsible for his or her own actions. When counsellors behave in ways that over-protect students or excuse them for irresponsible behaviours, they demonstrate a lack of respect for students, the school, and the counselling profession. By the same token, when counsellors try to do too much for students instead of giving students responsibility to do for themselves, they compromise their role as a helping professional. School counsellors have responsibility for encouraging students to develop independence and use their autonomy in an appropriate manner.

Encouraging student responsibility and autonomy means that school counsellors must accept students unconditionally and assume mutual responsibility for what occurs in the counselling relationship. In this way, invitational counselling fosters equality, collaboration, and trust, another element of the professional stance.

Trust. The services provided in a comprehensive school counselling program are cooperative, collaborative activities based on mutual trust. This mutual trust is most often established as the result of an inviting pattern of behaviours, rather than any single beneficial action. Arceneaux (1994) identified several sources that enable people to establish and maintain trust. These include *reliability* (consistency, dependability, and predictability), *genuineness* (authenticity and congruence), *truthfulness* (honesty, correctness of opinion, and validity of assertion), *intent* (good character, ethical stance, and integrity), and *competence* (intelligent behaviour, expertness, and knowledge).

All these elements play a role in helping counsellors and students establish trusting relationships. Winning students' trust is not always easy, particularly when they have been neglected, harmed, or damaged in other relationships. By remaining optimistic, demonstrating respect, and working on the sources that contribute to trustful relationships, school counsellors combine these ingredients into an intentional posture. This intentionality is the most crucial condition of a professionally inviting stance.

Intentionality. Optimism, respect, and trust reflect an intentionality that gives direction to individual helping relationships as well as to the larger comprehensive school counselling program. Referred to as "counselor intentionality" (Schmidt, 1994), this characteristic plays an important role in giving a school counselling program purpose and meaning.

Intentionality gives direction to all the helping relationships established by school counsellors, and guides the selection of beneficial goals

for a comprehensive program of services. Intentionality that respects and honors the individual needs of students while encouraging a direction that benefits the entire school is the heart of invitational counselling.

In recent years, the construct of intentionality has been rediscovered as a counselling variable that is vital to successful professional functioning (Ivey, 1994; Purkey & Schmidt, 1996; Schmidt, 1994). In developing comprehensive school programs, counsellors who function at a high level of intentionality are able to design various helping strategies and choose from several alternative helping modes to meet the needs of students. Similarly, intentional school counsellors select a wide range of responses in assisting students, parents, and teachers with long-term goals.

Most definitions of intentionality focus on the positive aspects of purposeful behaviours. Invitational counselling offers an expanded defi-

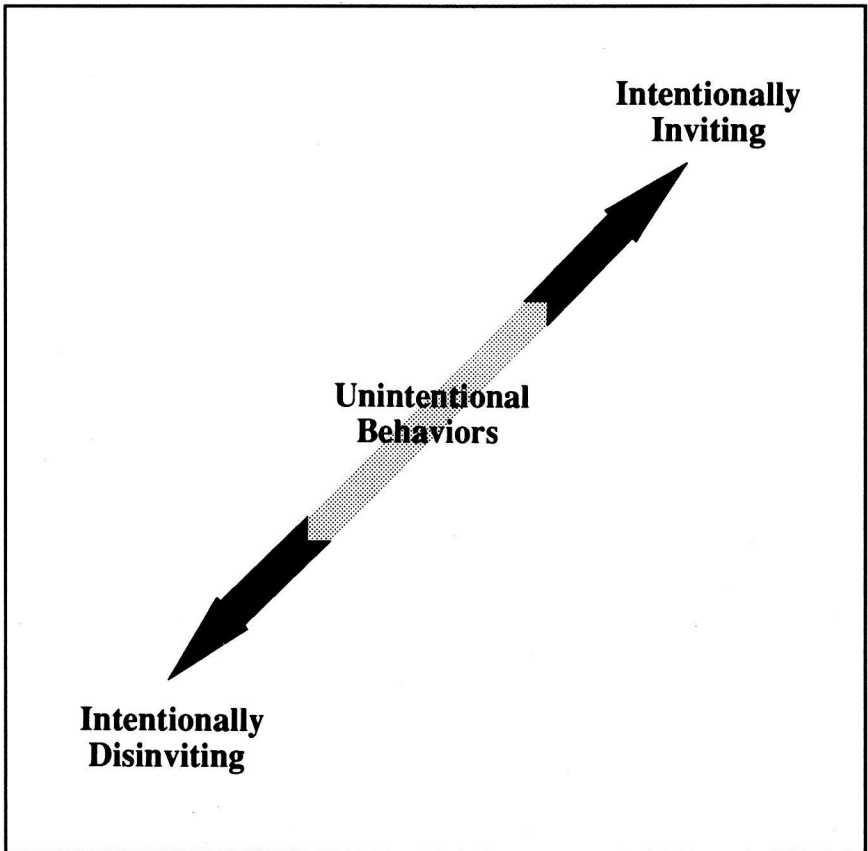


Figure 1
Intentionality.

inition that describes intentionality as a bipolar concept, with positive intentions at one pole and negative intentions at the other. Figure 1 shows this bipolar dimension of intentionality.

As presented in invitational counselling, intentionality can be a positive influence for psychotherapy or a powerful force for psychopathology. Intentionality encompasses a full range of positive and negative behaviours, and consequently, counsellors can be a beneficial presence, or a lethal one, in the lives of students, parents, and teacher: a frightful notion when contemplated in the context of school counselling. Certainly most professional counsellors function at helpful levels on behalf of students, parents, and teachers, but even with the most careful attention to these beneficial purposes, there are times when counsellors are unintentional in their behaviour.

Purkey and Novak (1996) adopted the term *unintentional* to identify purposeless, careless, or otherwise accidental behaviours. Figure 1 illustrates the uncertainty of unintentionality as it lies between the positive and negative poles of intentionality. In designing comprehensive programs of services, school counsellors attempt to function at a highly intentional and beneficial level, realizing that to behave otherwise neglects the developmental purpose of providing counselling services in a school environment (Paisley & Peace, 1996).

COMPATIBILITY OF INVITATIONAL COUNSELLING

Purkey and Schmidt (1996) contended that invitational counselling offers a theoretical structure that is compatible with other acceptable approaches to professional counselling. They listed the elements of compatibility as: (1) an acceptance of a perceptual orientation to understanding human behaviour; (2) an emphasis on self-concept as a dynamic force in human development; (3) an unwavering respect for human respect and dignity; and (4) the encouragement of wide applicability. Approaches to school counselling that value the role of perception and self-concept in student development and maintain high regard for student welfare are compatible with invitational counselling.

The invitational model encourages wide application of varied services by school counsellors in a developmentally focused program. These services include individual and group processes, consultation, assessment, and instruction. This variety of services allows school counsellors to apply invitational principles across a broad spectrum of developmental, preventive, and remedial concerns of students, parents, and teachers.

APPLICATION OF INVITATIONAL COUNSELLING IN SCHOOLS

As presented here, invitational counselling is not so much a new method of counselling as it is a belief system and guide for professional prac-

tice that can be integrated with compatible approaches into a comprehensive program of services. School counsellors constantly search for ways to manage their services and give meaning to their role in the school. The effort to design a comprehensive program of services distinguishes school counsellors from other counsellors who practice in different clinical settings and “offer either a limited range of services or narrowly focused services due to the specific populations they serve” (Schmidt, 1996, p. 29).

In applying invitational principles, school counsellors design instructional services for teachers to integrate with the curriculum; create preventive strategies for the welfare of the entire school community; and establish individual and small group processes to focus on particular concerns of students, parents, and teachers. Designing, creating, and establishing appropriate services within a comprehensive program requires adequate assessment of the people, places, policies, programs, and processes that comprise the school—what invitational counselling calls “assessing the Five P’s” (Purkey & Schmidt, 1996).

Assessing the Five P’s

In addition to the people who define a school community, there are limitless places, policies, programs, and processes that influence human relationships and student success. To determine what instructional, preventive, and helping services to incorporate into their programs, school counsellors begin with an evaluation of the Five P’s. Adequate assessment of these factors allows counsellors, students, parents, teachers, and administrators to target specific goals and plan appropriate strategies. This assessment process combines formal and informal procedures that begin with an evaluation of students’ developmental tasks.

The essential question here is what information will students need to successfully accomplish appropriate developmental tasks? Once this is determined, instructional activities can be designed and integrated into the curriculum so that all students have equal opportunity to learn this information. Similarly, assessment of the developmental needs of parents and teachers can provide school counsellors with information to plan appropriate parent education programs or teacher in-service activities.

School buildings consist of numerous places from the front lobby to the broom closet. An assessment of the places that comprise a school, enables teachers and administrators to make changes that benefit individuals and groups. For example, one middle school student disclosed to her counsellor that she did not use the bathroom all day long because it was usually messy and dirty. By informing the principal of this concern and helping the school design interventions by which (a) the custodians made scheduled visits to the restrooms, (b) teachers increased supervi-

sion, and (c) students participated in classroom discussions about responsible bathroom behaviour, the counsellor was able to make a positive difference.

Similarly, there may be policies, programs, or processes that interfere with student learning and development. In these instances, assessment can help discover ways to adjust policies, alter or create new programs, or change processes that inhibit student-teacher relationships, discriminate against people, or alienate particular students from the school. By performing a thorough assessment of the Five P's, counsellors place themselves in a stronger position to provide beneficial services in schools. With invitational counselling as a framework, school counsellors can also design specific counselling services using invitational assumptions and concepts.

Counselling and Consulting Services

Invitational counselling uses understandable language to describe and learn complex human relationships. For this reason, the concepts of inviting and disinviting, and being intentional and unintentional, can be taught to students at diverse developmental levels. Counsellors and teachers can adapt these concepts to curriculum goals that target students' self-development, responsible behaviours, and character education. Such a systematic approach, founded in perceptual psychology and self-concept theory, reflects the philosophy of counsellors who encourage "deliberate psychological education" in schools (Hayes, 1996).

Students can be taught the concepts of invitational functioning and use this knowledge to assess their own development and relationships with others. For example, Schmidt (1988) wrote a guide to friendship for middle graders that has been used by school counsellors with individual students and in group guidance. Lehr and Martin (1992) presented invitational strategies and interventions for schools to help students develop healthy attitudes and adopt constructive behaviours, thus avoiding being placed "at risk" in their development.

Invitational concepts also can be the framework around which the school counsellor and students examine concerns in individual and group counselling sessions. Once students are able to conceptualize their concerns from an invitational perspective, they are in a better position to determine their own responsibilities and choose appropriate action. By teaching students the invitational model, counsellors empower them to take control of their lives and have more influence over events that will determine the direction they choose.

In working with teachers and parents, school counsellors can adopt invitational principles for designing approaches to school discipline (Purkey & Strahan, 1986), developing positive student-teacher relation-

ships (Purkey & Stanley, 1991), or consulting with parents about ways to create healthier family relationships (Purkey & Schmidt, 1982). Counselors can encourage their schools to adopt the invitational model school-wide, and have their schools participate in the "Inviting School Award" program through the International Alliance for Invitational Education at The University of North Carolina at Greensboro.

All of these services and activities contribute to a comprehensive school counselling program and enable the counsellor to address a wide range of developmental issues for students, parents, and teachers. This is the ultimate goal of school counselling and the reason invitational counselling is an appropriate choice of counsellors when selecting a framework for designing a comprehensive program of services.

References

- Arceneaux, C. J. (1994). Trust: An exploration of its nature and significance. *Journal of Invitational Theory and Practice*, 3(1), 35-49
- Hayes, R. L. (1996). Continuing to give psychology away. *Elementary School Guidance & Counseling*, 30(2), 155-59.
- Ivey, A. E. (1994). *Intentional interviewing and counseling: facilitating client development in a multicultural society*. (3rd ed.). Pacific Grove, CA: Brooks/Cole.
- Lehr, J., & Martin, C. (1992). *We're all at risk: Inviting learning for everyone*. Minneapolis, MN: Educational Media Corporation.
- Paisley, P. O., & Peace, S. D. (1996) Developmental principles: A framework for school counseling programs. *Elementary School Guidance & Counseling*, 30(2), 85-93.
- Purkey, W. W. (1978). *Inviting school success: A self-concept approach to teaching and learning*. Belmont, CA: Wadsworth.
- Purkey, W. W., & Novak, J. (1996). *Inviting school success*. (3rd ed.) Belmont, CA: Wadsworth.
- Purkey, W. W., & Schmidt, J. J. (1982). Ways to be an inviting parent: Suggestions for the counselor-consultant. *Elementary School Guidance & Counseling*, 17(2), 94-99.
- Purkey, W. W., & Schmidt, J. J. (1987). *The inviting relationship: An expanded perspective for professional counseling*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall.
- Purkey, W. W., & Schmidt, J. J. (1990). *Invitational learning for counseling and development*. Ann Arbor, MI: ERIC/CAPS.
- Purkey, W. W., & Schmidt, J. J. (1996). *Invitational Counseling: A self-concept approach to professional practice*. Pacific Grove, CA: Books Cole.
- Purkey, W. W., & Stanley, P. H. (1991). *Invitational teaching, learning, & living*. Washington, DC: National Education Association.
- Purkey, W. W., & Strahan, D. B. (1986). *Positive discipline: A pocketful of ideas*. Columbus, OH: National Middle School Association.
- Schmidt, J. J. (1994, April). Counselor intentionality and effective helping. *CASS Digest*. ERIC/CASS Clearinghouse, The University of North Carolina at Greensboro. (EDO CG-94-05)
- Schmidt, J. J. (1988). *Invitation to friendship*. Minneapolis, MN: Educational Media Corporation.
- Schmidt, J. J. (1996). *Counseling in schools: Essential services and comprehensive programs*. (2nd ed.). Boston: Allyn & Bacon.
- Seligman, M. E. (1991). *Learned optimism*. New York: Knopf.
- Stafford, W. B. (1992). Invitational theory and counseling. In J. M. Novak (Ed.), *Advancing invitational thinking* (pp. 195-220). San Francisco, CA: Caddo Gap Press.

About the Author

Dr. John J. Schmidt is professor and chair of the Counselor and Adult Education Department at East Carolina University in Greenville, NC, USA. He has been a school counsellor in elementary through high school grades, a school system director of counselling services, and the state coordinator of school counselling in North Carolina. Dr. Schmidt has published over 50 professional articles and nine books, including *Counseling in Schools: Essential Services and Comprehensive Programs* by Allyn & Bacon.

Address correspondence to: Dr. John J. Schmidt, PO Box 2428, Greenville, NC 27836-0428.