



The Investigation of a Middle School Teacher Preparatory Program Through the Lens of Invitational Leadership

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ABSTRACT

Using the principles and domains of invitational leadership identified by Purkey and Novak (2016), the researchers focused specifically on the inclusion of caring, respect, trust, optimism, and intentionality throughout the domains of people, places, policies, programs, and processes for creating an inviting culture in a teacher preparatory program. The results concluded the program was effective at including many of the principles through the domains of invitational leadership by role modeling, building relationships within the community of learners, and offering collaborative opportunities to the students. However, often this use was unintentionally inviting indicating that there was a need to further study invitational leadership theory to implement it effectively.

Keywords: teacher preparatory programs, higher education, and invitational leadership theory

INTRODUCTION

Statement of the Problem

In a society where power has traditionally been held by white, heterosexual, non-disabled men (Johnson, 2018), the 21st century has seen a shift in the awareness of this imbalance (Howard & Ulferts, 2020; Mullen, 2010). Yet most teacher preparatory programs are resolved to approach this challenge with awareness solely (Juarez, Smith, & Hayes, 2008). Addressing the issue by adding only a required social justice course (Rowan, et al., 2021), novice teachers are graduating unprepared for the diversity of students filling their classrooms. Another approach to this challenge posited by these researchers is invitational leadership skills, but as a study conducted by Martin and Miller (2017) discovered, educators are unaware of how invitational leadership principles could address social justice in schools. The researchers posited this was due to the absence of these teachings in teacher and leadership preparatory programs (Martin & Miller). Since the obligation to prepare these teachers is the responsibility of the preparatory programs, this investigation examined the practices of such a program with the mission of providing effective culturally responsive teaching practices to its candidates.

Significance of the Problem

Preparing middle school teachers to be intentionally inviting and supportive of all students, teacher preparation programs must stray from the traditions of one-size-fits-all training (Juarez et al., 2008). Not prepared for all students are novice teachers entering their careers, as well as the students in their classes when universities are not responding to the cultural shift of society. Most middle school teachers enter education because they feel a calling as they care about preteen students and their success (Villegas, 2007). Teacher preparation programs need to capitalize on that intrinsic motivation by equipping them with the tools to be truly game changers in our middle schools. This research study illustrated how one university is preparing middle school teachers specifically on how to work effectively in a diverse school setting using culturally responsive teaching strategies.

Relevant Research

In a society where being different should theoretically be celebrated, it is the hardest thing for most young teenagers to do. They spend their days in school, navigating the emotional and social roller coaster of adolescents with little care for academics (Tomlin, 2016). With the onslaught of social media, this struggle has grown to epidemic proportions (Brown, Calvin, & Yeo, 2017). This is also the age when most teenagers are beginning to experiment with new identities for themselves with an increased number of middle-grade students admitting they identify differently than the "normal" teenager, including challenging topics in schools such as sexual preference and gender identity. A study done in 2011 surveyed 2,730 middle school students in grades 6-8 and found that 3.8% of students identified as lesbian, gay, or bisexual, and 1.3% identified as transgender (Shields et al., 2013). Similarly, students also face racial/ethnic diversity in a nation where half of the student population is non-white (Mitchell, 2016). However conversely, in most middle school classrooms, the teachers are white and have little, if any, experience or training to successfully address cultural inclusivity (Juarez, Smith, & Hayes, 2008).

Middle school students are children between the ages of 10-15 years old and are by most educators considered the most challenging group of learners (Association for Middle-Level Education [AMLE], 2010). Often characterized by their vast developmental and intellectual changes, they are walking contradictions of themselves and can test even the most graceful and flexible of any dedicated teacher (Kinney, 2015; Morin, 2020). This age is different from the elementary student they identified as a couple of years ago and still different from the high school student they will soon transition into (Wormeli, 2016), middle school students truly find themselves amidst a challenging journey (Sørli, Hagen, & Nordahl, 2020). They are experiencing accelerated physical, emotional, and cognitive growth while navigating intense social development and peer judgment (AMLE; Kinney; Morin; Wormeli, 2016).

Since traditional, single-style instruction is ineffective for many middle-level students, district decision-makers need to be committed and knowledgeable about this age group, and create best practices rooted in educational research (Kinney, 2015). Empowering middle school students to have a stake in their education and control of their learning is significant in adolescent development (AMLE, 2010). By engaging students within the safety of the learning community, teachers can provide young adolescents with the knowledge and skills necessary outside of the school structure (Carpenter, et al., 2004; Powell, 2001).

Educators may believe their classroom is equitable and culturally responsive when they are still teaching the same content, the same way, at the same pace (Tomlinson, 1995). In fact, designed not to support students from poor, minority, and non-English speaking backgrounds are most middle school structures and systems (McDaniel et al., 2001). This prevents ethnically diverse students from making relevant connections between school and life experience (Brown & Knowles, 2014). Diverse students deserve a learning community built on basic principles of equity, justice, and fairness (McDaniel et al., 2001). Acting as advocates for every student's right to learn, teachers need to address intentionally the needs of everyone, not the class as a whole or students grouped based on diversity (Kommer, 2006). Teaching these students requires a balance of society's influence on middle school behaviors and choices (Brown et al., 2017).

As leaders in a middle school classroom, teachers play a crucial role in the learning environment as well as the academic and personal development of their students (Wenzel & Roberts, 2014). Unfortunately, most middle school educators have not been properly prepared to create an inviting classroom necessary for diverse learners to feel safe to seek the support they need (Marchitello & Trinidad, 2019). With so much at stake, the training and education of middle school teachers are critical (Howell, Faulkner, Cook, Miller, & Thompson, 2016; Weisberg, 2018).

However, there is widespread inconsistency in what preparatory programs consider as requirements of a well-trained middle school teacher. Particularly reflected is the lack of specialized degree programs for the middle-grade levels (AMLE, 2015). Most training programs offer undergraduate degrees in elementary education with general training in young learners, or a degree in secondary education with an emphasis on a specific high school course (Conklin, 2007). Generalizing either of these two degrees to the middle school education major is a disservice to the crucial aspects needed for a successful middle school teacher (AMLE, 2015). Teachers being able to adjust to diversity and the individual needs of every student, in a safe, inviting learning environment is essential for middle-level student success (Marchitello & Trinidad, 2019).

Conceptual Framework

Ultimately, the relevant literature led the researchers to the conceptual framework of invitational leadership to better prepare teacher candidates for middle-level students. A primary focus in every classroom should be the individual education of each student. However, education means more than the isolated learning of knowledge (Monahan, 2017) and should include the setting in which the learning occurs. Invitational leadership, when used in a school setting, creates an environment that is conducive to learning by establishing intentional, authentic relationships with every person in the building and respecting everything in the environment (Lynch, 2012; Purkey & Novak, 2016). Through a teacher's caring actions, transformed is a classroom into a safe learning environment that welcomes all students as members of an inclusive community (Sitler, 2008). When teachers, administrators, and staff in a building practice this caring intention, they are inviting every student to be successful through a welcoming school culture (Sitler, 2008). This outward display of unconditional support from all the adults helps students feel like they are part of a community as they overcome the struggle associated with middle school (Brinegar, 2010). Invitational leadership provides such functional and practicable methods to meet the needs of these middle school students (Purkey & Novak, 2015).

At the core of invitational leadership is the intentionality of establishing a socially just environment that maintains cultural awareness (Monahan, 2017). Purkey and Novak (2016) defined five foundational principles of invitational leadership, collectively referred to as I-CORT. I-CORT is representative of the elements of invitational leadership: intentionality, caring, optimism, respect, and trust (Purkey & Novak). Purkey and Novak (2015) described an invitation as “offering something beneficial for consideration” (p. 6). For middle-level students, this benefit can include opportunities their teachers developed for all students to participate in collaboration and share opinions, feelings, or perspectives through group discussions (Monahan, 2017). Invitational leadership points to caring as a prerequisite for supporting and motivating students but also emphasizes the necessity for cultural awareness and acceptance of students' unique situations (Monahan, 2017; Purkey & Novak, 2015).

In addition to extending invites through I-CORT, educators must also focus on five interdependent domains of invitational leadership that impact school climate (Anderson, 2019), Purkey and Novak (2016) further described these principles as the “Five P”. Utilized in the learning environment, this includes people, places, policies, programs, and processes (Purkey & Novak) and it is within each that invites demonstrating I-CORT are used.

As educators implement the principles of I-CORT and the domains of the “Five P’s” the last part of the invitational model are the levels. Researchers (Purkey & Siegel, 2003; Purkey & Novak, 2012; Purkey et al., 2020) explained the four levels of invitational leadership as intentionally inviting, unintentionally inviting, unintentionally disinviting, and intentionally disinviting. Recently Purkey et al. (2020) added the “plus factor.” The plus factor explanation is invitational leadership at its finest where the actions are so inviting and effortless that they become “invisible to the untrained eye” (Purkey et al., 2020, p. 68). The framework of invitational leadership is comprehensive, touching on all aspects of teaching middle age children, and provides steps toward achieving an inviting, positive culture. For this reason, used was invitational leadership as the conceptual lens as a means to examine a middle-level teacher preparatory program.

Research Design and Research Questions

Using a critical lens paradigm gave the researchers the opportunity to administer a mixed-design study in a way that created a path to change (Creswell, 2014). Furthermore, using such a critical paradigm allowed the researchers “to promote the deconstruction and critique of institutions, laws, organizations, definitions, and practices for power inequities and inequities of effectiveness” (Guido, Chavez, & Lincoln, 2010, p. 9). The questions that guided this inquiry were: How is the university faculty ensuring the most intentionally inviting environment using I-CORT through the “Five Ps”: people, places, policies, programs, and processes? Is there a difference between the perceptions of Middle School Teacher Education undergraduate students and alumni on how the middle school preparatory program’s use of the “5 P’s” (*people, processes, places, policies, and programs*) influences the overall culture of the program?

METHOD

Setting

The university examined in this study was a Midwest teaching University. It is in a community with a population of 20,000 surrounded by rural settings. Founded in 1871 as a teaching college, the University now has a student enrollment of 10,000 in its four academic schools

offering 150 undergraduate programs (Fast Facts, 2021). The College of Education consists of departments, and the Middle School-Junior High Education program is in one of these departments (College of Education, 2021) and is the focus of this inquiry. Offering specialized training for teaching grades 5-9, pre-service teachers can earn a Missouri teaching certification in seven different subject areas (Middle School Education, 2021).

Participants

Merriam and Tisdell (2016) suggested that purposeful sampling should include selection criteria that will provide a rich experience while producing enough coverage of the phenomena that one is studying. In this study, the researchers engaged a two-tiered sample (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). One tier was the selected University preparatory program, and the other tier was the participants involved in the study.

Purposefully chosen because of their affiliation with the middle school preparatory program were all the participants. The study included the four university professors (n=4) that represented the middle school program and were teaching undergraduate courses and/or supervising field experiences. Chosen were these individuals because they were the faculty responsible for ensuring pre-service middle school teachers met the requirements for state certification and prepared for successful classroom careers.

Another group of participants was currently employed Alumni of the middle school program (N=12). Another group of participants was the currently enrolled undergraduate students including student teachers as well as the alumni not involved with the focus groups. All students currently enrolled in the program and attending classes or student teaching (n=40).

Interview

To collect qualitative data on the perceptions of the middle school program faculty on the teaching and modeling of invitational leadership tenets (I-CORT), a semi-structured interview was conducted over Zoom and audio-recorded. The interviews last 45-60 minutes and follow-up interviews conducted when needed for clarification. The open-ended questions asked each participant to reflect specifically on their instructional methods and to describe any intentional practices for including invitational leadership principles in the course materials or as role modeling for the students.

Focus Group

Assembled for qualitative data collection according to the guidelines from Krueger and Casey (2015) were two focus groups. The participants were alumni of UCM's middle school program that were serving as contracted classroom teachers in area schools. This method allowed the researcher the opportunity to hear their personal stories describing their experiences in the program and how, if at all, it has influenced their classroom leadership style. As recommended by Krueger and Casey (2015), each of the two focus groups was restricted to six participants. Lasting 60-90 minutes, conducted were both focus groups using a virtual meeting website. The open-ended questions that guided the conversation allowed participants to consider their own experiences and interpretations of the teaching methods and learning activities used by the middle school program faculty to incorporate or role model invitational leadership principles (I-CORT) through the invitational domains (5P's) (Seidman, 2013).

Document Analysis

To triangulate the qualitative data as suggested by Merriam and Tisdell (2016), document analysis occurred. Analyzed were syllabus for each course in the middle school program. In addition, analyzed was the vision, mission, and strategic planning for the College and the Department. Included as well were lesson plans by candidates in the program and alumni. An examination of those documents looked for invitational leadership principles embedded in the program's core standards.

Survey

Collected using an online survey format as recommended by Fink (2017) was the quantitative data. This tool probed currently enrolled students and the alumni of the program about their perceptions of the invitational leadership elements and domains taught and modeled in the middle school program at UCM. This survey was a modified version of the existing *Inviting School Survey-Revised* (ISS-R). This 50-question survey used a 5-point Likert-scale presence of the five domains of invitational leadership: people, programs, processes, policies, and places (Smith & Purkey, 2015), through the principles of intentionality, caring, optimism, respect, and trust, collectively referred to as I-CORT by Purkey and Novak (2016). Modification of the survey occurred with permission from the authors. The modified ISS-R survey required reliability and validity assessment. To ensure reliability, the researcher utilized a test-retest model (Fink, 2017). This assessment allowed the researcher to establish the overall and topical Cronbach alpha scores for internal reliability. The Cronbach scale measured how the questions relate to one another with a high score of 1 showing perfect consistency reliability, $>.80$ is good reliability $.70$ is considered adequate, and $>.60$ would be considered moderate (Field, 2013). The modified ISS-R survey used in this research measured a $.95$ Cronbach alpha score demonstrating good reliability for data collection with this tool.

Data Analysis

Simultaneously reviewed were the data from the focus groups and interviews, followed by the survey data (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The researchers conducted continuous data analysis throughout the study to triangulate the data. After the transcription of the interviews and focus groups, member-checking (Creswell, 2014) occurred allowing participants to modify any responses. As the researchers analyzed the transcripts, coded were frequent and common descriptive phrases and organized to determine were the five principles of invitational leadership, taught or modeled along with the analysis of the five domains (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). With this coding, the researchers were able to identify and compare the perceptions of the faculty, the graduates of the program, as well as the current students. Similarly, reviewed were documents to determine if the invitational leadership principles/domains infiltrated the program's goals, curriculum and teaching.

Quantitative data collected from the modified ISS-R survey used an analysis of variance method (ANOVA) for research question two to determine if a significant statistical difference in each of the five domains of invitational leadership, or dependent variables, existed between the independent variables, the undergraduate students and program alumni (Green & Salkind, 2003). The ANOVA is a parametric statistical test that allows for the testing of more than one dependent variable in the same analysis; thus, the use of the ANOVA test was appropriate for data analysis (Field, 2017). With the students sorted into the two predetermined groups, evaluated was each score for each subscale for significant differences at the $.05$ significance.

RESULTS

Below are the findings from the data analysis of the two research questions. For research question one, analyzed were the interview focus group data, along with documents. For the second research question, used was the survey.

Q1. How is the university faculty ensuring the most intentionally inviting environment using I-CORT through the “Five Ps”: people, places, policies, programs, and processes?

Invites through People

For a school to be inviting, students must be valued and made to feel capable through the positive relationships built with others (Purkey & Novak, 2015). When sharing their experiences in the middle school program, an Alumnus noted the faculty forged strong relationships with the students. One alumnus remembered, “Relationships were pushed from day one. That was always the most important thing.” Another Alumni N commented on the relationships she established while in the program, “I have people that I still talk to consistently from the education department.” When we did assign group projects, I was never like, “Oh, I’m stuck with them.” It was always, “Okay. Cool. I’m working with them today.” Another Alumnus noted that group work played a major role in establishing bonds with her classmates, “Once we were with our little group, that’s when I started feeling closer to people and like I really knew them for sure. Freshman year I didn’t really get to know anyone that well but once I was in the middle school specific, I really did get close to everyone, and I really liked and loved my time with them.”

A faculty member also mentioned the relationships students build with their peers while in the program, “That networking is huge and the fact that they can have someone to lean on when they are those first or second-year teachers that are overwhelmed.” When the researchers asked of the focus group, “What are some of the main things you feel you gained from the middle school program that you have incorporated into your classrooms? Alumni answered with, “Building relationships.” “Relationships has been the number one thing.” A similar comment from a faculty supported the alumni’s perception of their relationships with faculty. “I think kids like their teachers in the middle school program. I think they have good relationships with the people that teach them.”

Invites through Places

All students deserve a learning environment where they are safe and supported (Anderson, 2017). Analysis of a course syllabus uncovered an objective for how the middle school program is informing its education students to “understand the teacher’s role in creating a learning environment that encourages positive social interaction.” A Faculty believes the program is sending the right message to its students when highlighting, “I think we stress that it’s important that they create a positive learning environment. I think that what you will find in the middle school program is that teachers will do icebreaker activities or other getting-to-know-you activities with their students. They will encourage a lot of cooperation and use a lot of cooperative learning and activities in their classes.” An Alumnus explained, “I always felt comfortable there. Those were my favorite classes because I knew I was always going to learn something, but I was going to have a good time.” Another alumnus continued, “We focused a lot on engaging the kids in a safe environment, and I think that’s probably what I tried to take away the most.”

Invites through Policy

Created to be fair for all students are policies yet inviting teachers to consider special circumstances and diverse needs of the students when enforcing these rules and procedures (Monahan, 2017). When asked about her perception of how students feel about the attendance policy in the program, one Faculty shared, "I have not had any pushback from students about it, so I'm assuming that they find it to be fair. To me, "studenting" is your job, and you show up to work." Another Faculty agreed with the professional expectation of attendance by sharing, but noted, "I do have students who have had health concerns. If I know what's happening, I can accommodate it, but I need to know what's happening." On the topic of assignment due dates, faculty agreement about these policies came with individual anecdotes of when they personally accommodated students that needed the extra support. For example, a faculty admitted, "While I have a stated policy, my reality is much more flexible. If I know what's happening, I can help." An Alumnus shared a personal experience while a student in the program, "I remember in the middle school program, when I had problems or issues, and you guys were willing to let me have some time. I had ankle surgery one year and I was out for a week and you people were like, "You know what, no problem. Just get it to me." "I had no problem getting it in later than assigned." Another Alumnus had a similar experience with the policies in the program and noted, "I learned a lot of grace from you guys like things happen. I had a lot of stuff that happened in college. The fact that I had teachers that were willing to give me a break, I feel like grace is a big thing that I try to have in my classroom, and just making sure that the students know, "I'm going to work with you. I'm going to help you out. Let's get caught up." Those kinds of things happen all the time, and I feel like that's because of the relationships and what my teachers did at UCM.

Invites through Programs

Highly qualified instructors (Purkey & Novak, 2015) that can prepare their candidates to respond to diversity with awareness, acceptance, and action (Anderson, 2017) while teaching in education programs that train teachers to be invitational leaders. As an example of how the middle school program offers these highly qualified leaders, a faculty spoke of the caliber of professional experiences brought to the education program. "I think one of the biggest pros to our middle school program is that the majority is taught by people, who have been there, and we've done it and we know how things work and what things don't. We are changing our curriculum to meet the needs of our students so they can mirror that when they're trying to meet the needs of their students in the future."

In addition to highly qualified faculty, Martin and Miller (2017) suggested that education-training programs should equip their students to be culturally responsive and inclusive in their classrooms. A reflection found in the COE's mission statement, "The teacher education program prepares individuals as professional educators for an ever-changing, culturally diverse population." This statement is part of the COE's syllabus template and is included on all syllabi analyzed for this study, along with student outcomes. An objective found in several lesson plans stated, "Identify similarities and differences of desirable student activity programs for middle-level education as they relate to the developmental stages of the translucent including emotional, social, physical, and intellectual growth." Conversely, another Alumnus shared her frustration with the lack of diversity training and experiences in the middle school program, "I don't really feel like being inclusive of all people was really focused when I was in the program. You learn how to differentiate for students with IEPs or struggling students and of scaffolding.

But working with LGBTQ students, students of different races, and things like that, I think in my experience, almost everywhere I went to observe, I just felt like it was mostly white middle-class schools. I do not really feel like we talked anything really about that and a lot of some of the more common issues that kids face these days. In my classes, I don't really feel like it was addressed much if at all." Different from her peers in the response to inclusion and diversity taught in the program, another Faculty member highlighted the recent addition of trauma-informed care to the curriculum. "That not only benefits our students with dealing with their trauma but raises awareness of the impact of childhood trauma. Then they need to think about developing their own professional safety net for their students."

Invites through Processes

The learning process in an invitational school is inclusive and collaborative in nature (Purkey & Novak, 2016) and all students feel valued as members of the group (Usher & Pajares, 2006). An Alumnus explained he learned the most from the role modeling in the classes. It was all really about role modeling by the teachers on how to teach effectively. That is probably what I learned most about how to teach by watching the professors teach." Another Alumnus noted that not only were learning strategies such as cooperative learning discussed, but the faculty also modeled them. Another alumnus quickly agreed with this perspective and then credited the field experience component as a pivotal process in the program. "I would say the field experience. There were a couple of things I directly borrowed from you guys." When discussing field experience required in the middle school program, A Faculty member shared, "I think field experiences change things immensely because being able to physically engage with students really makes a world of difference." She continued to describe how she prepares her students for field experiences in diverse classrooms. "I openly talk to my students about transformative learning theory. When things happen that are uncomfortable, you can either ignore them, or you can learn from them and refine your understanding of the world."

Q2. Is there a difference between the perceptions of Middle School Teacher Education undergraduate students and alumni on how the middle school preparatory program's use of the "5 P's" (people, processes, places, policies, and programs) influences the overall culture of the program?

The researchers used an independent t-test to identify significant differences in perception between the two groups of participants regarding the tenants of invitational leadership taught in the program. Analysis of t-test data (see Table 1) showed a significant difference in the areas of people, programs, and policies while found were no significant difference regarding places and processes. Results for people show (students: $M=4.45$, $SD=0.276$; alumni: $M=4.62$, $SD=0.184$). Therefore, it is revealed that the difference between groups is statistically significant ($t(30) = 2.066$, $p=0.048$). Results for programs show (students: $M=4.25$, $SD=0.363$; alumni: $M=4.60$, $SD=0.075$) revealing the difference between groups is statistically significant ($t(12) = 2.516$, $p=0.027$). Results for policies show (students: $M=4.44$, $SD=0.251$; alumni: $M=4.68$, $SD=0.071$) revealing the difference between groups is statistically significant ($t(12) = 2.422$, $p=0.032$). Results for places show (students: $M=4.11$, $SD=0.427$; alumni: $M=4.21$, $SD=0.301$). Therefore, it is revealed that the difference between groups is not statistically significant ($t(22) = 0.724$, $p=0.477$). Results for processes show (students: $M=4.17$, $SD=0.529$; alumni: $M=4.54$, $SD=0.397$). Therefore, it is revealed that the difference between groups is not statistically significant ($t(14) = 1.577$, $p=0.137$).

Table 1 t-test Group Statistics

	Current Students		Alumni		t	P	df
	Mean	Standard Deviation	Mean	Standard Deviation			
5Ps of Invitational Leadership	n=11		n=38				
People	4.45	0.276	4.62	0.184	2.066	0.048*	30
Processes	4.17	0.529	4.54	0.397	1.577	0.137	14
Places	4.11	0.427	4.21	0.301	0.724	0.477	22
Policies	4.44	0.251	4.68	0.071	2.422	0.032*	12
Programs	4.25	0.363	4.60	0.075	2.516	0.027*	12

Note: n=49 participants, $p < .05$ *

DISCUSSION

According to Williams (2012), teachers that are invitational leaders use intentionality in their development of caring relationships and a safe learning environment while filling the role of student advocate. Both the faculty and alumni addressed the teachings and experiences in the program as positive and impactful for future middle school educators. All participants viewed how integral the building of relationships was in the success of the program. In invitational leadership, caring is central to building relationships (Purkey & Novak, 2016). Many Alumni noted how everyone genuinely cared about each other in the middle school program and now, as a teacher, they want their students to feel that in their classroom. Research by Strahan, Smith, McElrath, and Toole (2001) declared that the foundation for caring relationships is mutual respect. Mentioned was another critical component of invitational leadership, respect. Regarded as a recurring lesson practiced and taught in the program, as noted by the majority of faculty and alumni. When teachers consistently use care and respect when engaging with students, the next step to establishing strong relationships with students is trust (Napper, 2019). To demonstrate the teaching of trust in the middle school program, several Alumni remembered being told that as teachers they had to be able to show others, especially students, a piece of themselves. Being vulnerable and inviting students in is how they learn they can trust their teacher and eventually their peers. To be optimistic in an invitational classroom, the teacher and the students trust that bad situations will get better (Monahan, 2017). As an example of how this middle school program reflects optimism, most of the faculty shared exemptions to stated policies or modifications to procedures when students needed the extra support. Williams (2012), who asserted that a teacher's words and actions alone do not establish relationships nor a safe environment, supported this practice. It is born from the teacher's genuine belief and treatment that every student is important and every circumstance is unique. Throughout all the discussions of faculty behavior within the program, the alumni noted that the faculty were intentional with their values and beliefs, their teaching strategies, and the way in which they built relationships with students.

However, when examining the quantitative from this inquiry, not all current students nor alumni felt that the "5Ps" was inviting as discussed through the interviews and the focus groups. Perceived to be intentional in their invites were processes and places, however people,

programs and policies were not as inviting. This inconsistency between the “5Ps” denoted that these individuals within the middle school program were unintentionally disinviting. As Purkey et al., (2020) explained the four levels of invitational leadership as intentionally inviting, unintentionally inviting, unintentionally disinviting, and intentionally disinviting. While many of the behaviors of the faculty and their interactions with their students were positive and appear to be intentionally inviting, perhaps they were unintentionally inviting in those teaching processes with a minority of students, not because of intent but perhaps due to not understanding how important all actions are essential when seeking to create an inviting environment. If these educators are seeking to be intentional in all their “invites” throughout all “5Ps” their actions must be so inviting and effortless that they become “invisible to the untrained eye” (Purkey et al., 2020, p. 68).

CONCLUSIONS

Even though alumni articulated through focus groups how the faculty modelled the principles of I-CORT and how they provided a safe learning environment, the faculty surveyed revealed inconsistent “Invites” with people, policies, and programs. Therefore, the data suggests that while the faculty through their behavior and actions were unintentionally disinviting with three of the 5P’s, the alumnus in the focus groups noted that the engagement with the faculty allowed them to see the building of positive relationships between the faculty, between the students, and between the faculty and students. These faculty members have created a positive relationship with most of the students and demonstrated a willingness to continue to grow.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE

Based on the results of the study, the program’s faculty needs to be intentional in identifying and applying invitational leadership skills in the college classroom. Responses from study participants showed a heavy reliance on trusting what the faculty was doing. There was no mention of the teachers pointing out what they were doing, why they were doing it, and how it would benefit them in a middle school classroom. The transference of methods for teaching adults to teaching middle school students is not always apparent to young professionals, so intentional inviting behaviors should occur.

Additionally, the program needs make an intentional effort to include specific diversity training to all students. Added should be at least one required course in Diversity and Social Justice should to the program of study for middle school education majors framed within the tenets of invitational leadership. This will broaden student awareness and knowledge in terms of the impact to various types of diverse populations in our society and thus, our nation’s schools. This is the foundation for defining the goals of invitational leadership. In addition, the program’s faculty needs to be intentional by coordinating field experiences and field trips to middle schools outside the local geographic area. Exposure to classrooms with diverse middle school populations will provide authentic practice for new teachers to develop inviting practices and a safe learning environment for all middle school students. Finally, the program needs intentional recruiting efforts of students from diverse backgrounds. As our classrooms fill with diversity of varying types, the teachers should represent these populations as well. By visiting high schools and talking with students about the impact their personal stories could have on middle school students can accomplish this challenge.

Next, the program needs to build trauma informed care understandings and activities into the curriculum. Understanding that diversity is more than demographics, middle school teachers need to be aware of how to connect with all students, including those from traumatic situations. When teachers are invitational leaders, intentionally they know their students well they can meet their individual needs to feel welcome and safe in the learning environment.

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