

# We're not in Kansas anymore: a learning journey for Clarkson CHS

**John S Young** – Invitational Theory provides a unique language of transformation for the school culture from awareness, to understanding, to application, to adoption. The need to improve students' literacy and numeracy standards of achievement has meant Clarkson Community High School had to go through significant change. An increasing emphasis on data-driven decision-making is central to the school's improvement.

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Photographer: Martin Kennealey –  
Community Newspaper Group

In 2015, Clarkson Community High School put on a spectacular musical production, *The Wiz*. It was during a matinee performance that it occurred to me that the symbolism gave some parallel to the school's learning journey. In the classic film *The Wizard of Oz*, when Dorothy first sees the Land of Oz sepia dissolves into Technicolor, and she says to her dog, Toto: "We're not in Kansas anymore." Metaphor and colour each brings a new perspective to the good work that has characterised meaningful change at Clarkson Community High School over the past five years.

Invitational Theory provides a framework for instructional systems

because you can analyse every initiative through the lens. Executive Director of the International Alliance for Invitational Education (IAIE) Dr Joan Fretz explains in correspondence: "No other framework provides such a clear understanding of what actually causes students to engage, work hard, persevere and trust their teachers. The key is self-concept theory, the perceptual traditional and democratic practice – these are the foundations for invitational learning theory and its application."

The adoption of the intentional stance means inviting leaders simultaneously understand the theory, engaging in practice and the meaning of the Invitational Education research. They care about the

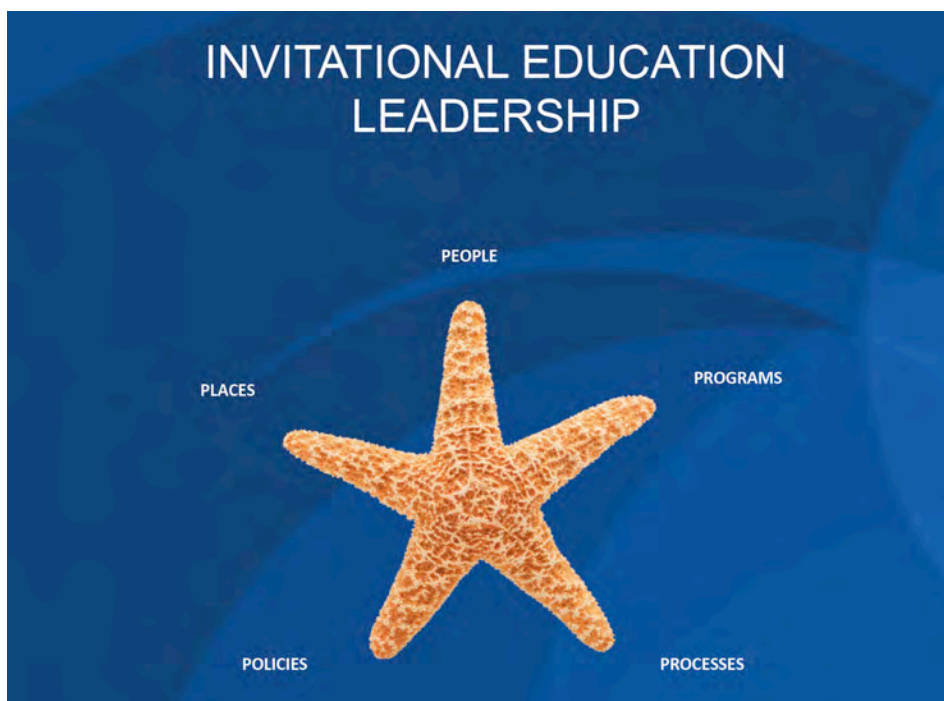
consequences of their actions and interactions with others.

Invitational Theory and its practice has clear moral purpose, as Prof John Novak said in correspondence April, 2016: *“John Dewey supported democracy because he felt it is the most educative form of governance... the democratic ethos is the extension of individual ethics to social ethic, paying attention to the sorts of people we are and what we seek to become... involved in this thinking is an expansive and imaginative approach to ethics and morality that is open to a variety of ways of enjoyment and growth...”*

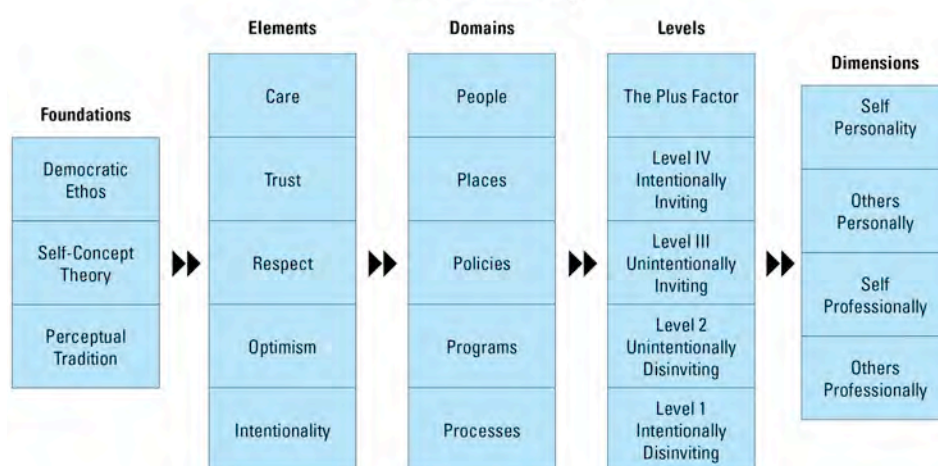
The 5Ps of Invitational Education work because everyone understands them. Each one understands their role and influence. The school principal is the architect. S/he has a detailed perspective, and is mindful of complexity. The bricklayer, the labourer who mixes the cement relates to the vision and needs only understand that which is of significance to their work and hence to them. In an Invitational Education school everyone gets the overall vision, the 5Ps and the starfish graphic (right). The principal knows the importance of the psychology (self-concept theory) of the metaphor of dealing ‘blue cards’ (positive messages.) In most other schools without the *intentionality* of cooperation, optimism, respect and trust (ICORT), principals struggle to provide a coherent vision of what works and most importantly, why. They by and large tend to focus on the consideration of high-stakes testing for literacy and numeracy, university matriculation and about pastoral care in non-specific ways.

As Dr William W Purkey explained in correspondence: *“Invitational Theory provides a unique language to help us think about the deeper significance of what really happens to people in schools. Without a language it is difficult to think about the deeper symbolic structure of education.”*

The diagram (right) is reproduced from an article written by Purkey and Novak in 2015.



Invitational Theory



### School background

Clarkson Community High School is located in the northern outer coastal suburbs of Perth, Western Australia. Many of the students entering the school as new enrolments are assessed as achieving at significantly below national minimum standards set by the Australian Curriculum Assessment and Reporting Authority.

For example, in one year the national benchmark standard for mean performance in most areas tested was approximately 540. Students entering Clarkson were 60 below the mean in reading, 73 below in writing, 74 below in spelling, 46 below in numeracy and 85 below in grammar.

Students entering Clarkson require engagement and a positive learning environment that encourages and develops excellence and achievement. Clarkson leaders are mindful of three important factors: (i) that socio-economic

status has a predictable, albeit not deterministic, impact on students’ life chances; (ii) starting gate inequalities associated with schooling have been well documented and have the potential for significant negative impact; and (iii) that mitigating school compositional effects is essential for students’ success and upward social mobility.

Engaging students in learning is an increasingly difficult task at Clarkson because of low levels of literacy at transition from primary schools. Enforcing a rules-based curriculum to basically ‘game’ the test for high-stakes testing routines such as NAPLAN and OLN will only further disengage students from learning. Simply put, at the heart of the instructional core students invariably fail to succeed not because of a lack of learning skills, but a lack of learning relevance and belief that they can succeed.

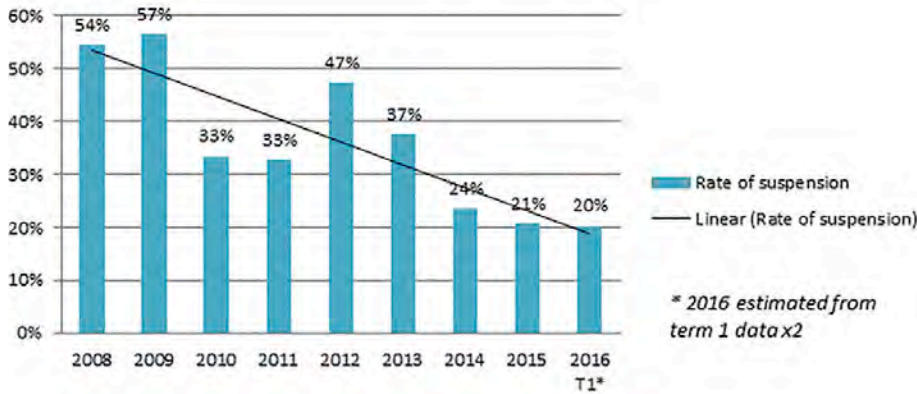
### Positive school climate

As Fretz explains: *“Invitational Theory provides a positive school climate and messages students that they are able, valuable, and responsible, and treats them accordingly. This ignites motivation and enhances student engagement. Engaging students in education is fundamental to learning.”*

Students’ engagement, their attendance and retention at school, are vital for improving opportunities for life. Everything and everybody influences human existence and invitational teachers know interactions shape experience and deepen awareness of each individual’s unique talents and interests.

Invitational Theory is simultaneously simple and very complex. It provides the optics for systems thinking and the framework to make the vision of the school a reality. Senge argues that systems thinking based on personal mastery, mental models, team learning and

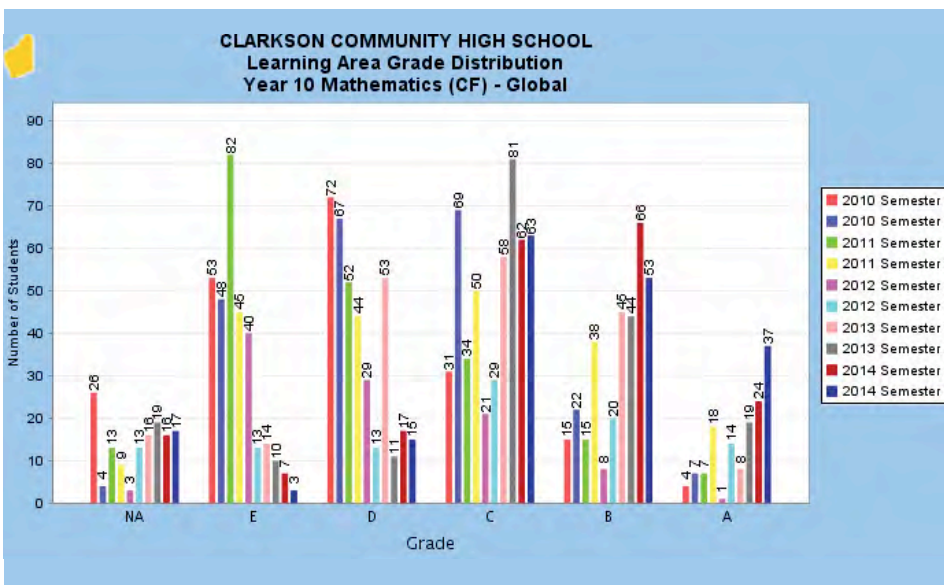
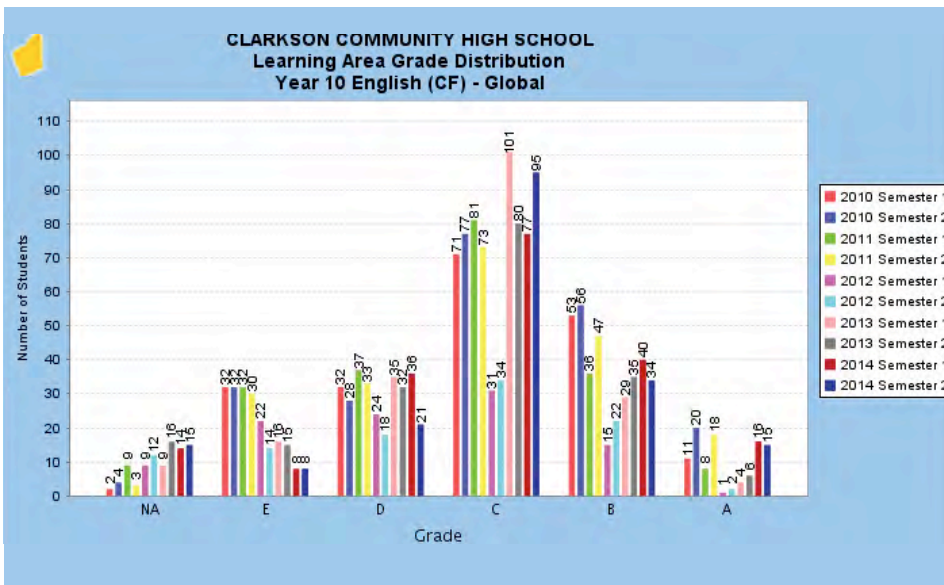
**Clarkson CHS**  
**Semester 1 Suspension rate (Suspensions/Enrolments)**



**Index of Community Socio-Educational Advantage (ICSEA)\***

	Bottom quarter	Middle quarters	Top quarter
School Distribution	38%	34%	22%
Australian Distribution	25%	25%	25%

\*Source:myschool.edu.au



shared vision is essential, given the complexities of real change. Using systems thinking to drive positive gains in teaching and learning meant aligning high-leverage strategies to maximize learning.

**School data plan**

Data are used in building a culture of self-evaluation and reflection and informs decision-making, interventions and initiatives. The leaders have responsibility to harmonise and implement school improvement by leading change as opposed to merely managing the status quo. The promotion of learning based on data has become the most important criterion for effective decision-making. Evidence that informs teachers about their effectiveness, the most critical evidence, is the key to understanding the effective use of data in schools, and then scaling up success from the instructional core. The consistent message is to use data to support learning.

Clarkson has a five-week data analysis cycle for learning areas. The monitoring and analysis of data is essential in informing us about students' progress in classrooms. Three golden rules underpinning the Clarkson data plan are derived from Harris (2011): (i) "Hold teachers accountable for what they can control; (ii) hold them partly accountable for important factors they partly control; and (iii) attach stakes to performance measures that are proportional to the quality of those measures; that is, inversely related to the degree of statistical error."

The challenge is to establish significant, targeted strategies and to ensure students' performance is improved and measured continuously. Evidence-based improvement is central to the thinking because as Prof John Hattie says, "Without data you merely have opinion!" Sharing data across learning areas allows teachers to focus on more effective interventions. Lead teachers continue to explore how to improve practices and systems with the effective use of data.

At Clarkson the culture is that accountability for improvement centred on data is seen as being neither punitive nor judgemental in relation to teacher efficacy and school leadership, but as a needs assessment for carefully targeted interventions to improve teachers' and leaders' effectiveness over time. It is not aligned with either sanctions or rewards, but is intended as an impartial mechanism to focus on the resources required to continue to build teacher capacity and improve the instructional core.

The need to improve learning by inviting student involvement has allowed us to better engage students and to embrace improvement and opportunities for excellence. Simultaneously, this meant an evolving evidence-based approach to improving literacy and numeracy outcomes.

This invitational, data-driven approach continues to produce improvement in academic performance. Teachers focus on identifying

students' needs and developing strategies that assist the instructional core. Students working in the context of targeted content to raise standards of student achievement and wellbeing.

### Building teacher capacity

Performance management has a clear focus on encouraging teachers to reflect on their success in demonstrating to students that they are able, valuable, and responsible through their words, actions, and instructional practices. Engagement is crucial.

The meta-analysis in Visible Learning by Hattie illustrated that, "Good teachers – those who know their content, who know about pedagogy and how children learn, who build engaging learning relationships with their students, who give timely feedback, and now have a repertoire of teaching strategies that they can adjust to suit their students' learning needs and better learning opportunities for the children and young people in their care."

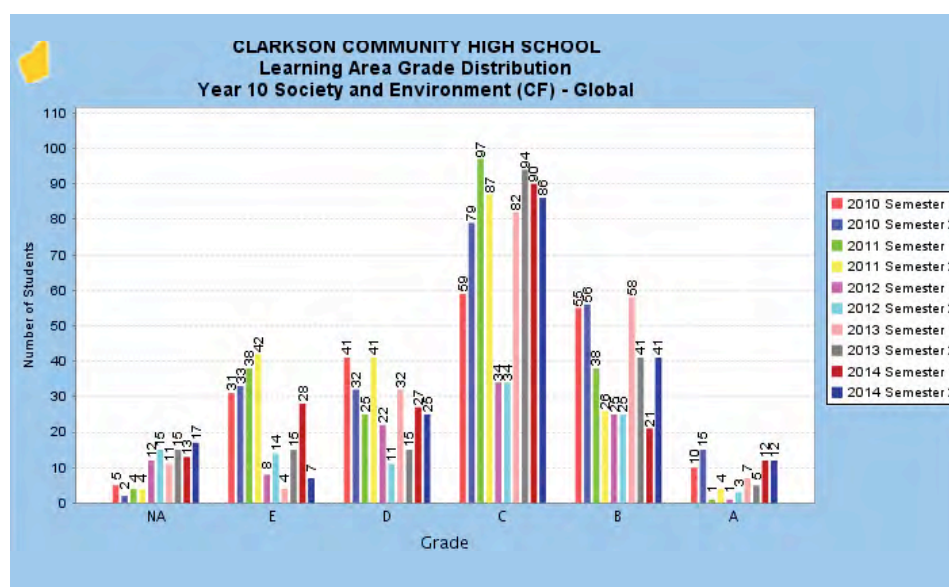
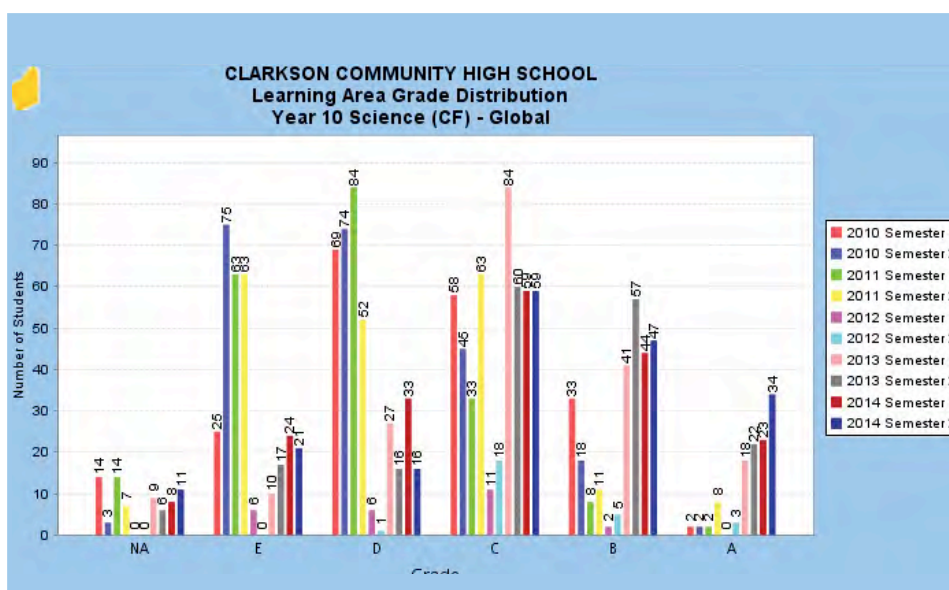
The five elements of our Invitational Education starfish – People, Places, Programs, Policies and Processes – underpin performance management and all planning at Clarkson. Performance management has a clear focus on encouraging teachers to reflect on their success in inviting our students to engage in learning. The National School Improvement Tool (NSIT) and its nine dimensions, focuses Clarkson leadership on three main questions: *Where are we going? How are we going? Where to next?* (Hattie, 2005)

Integral to the answering of such questions is determining what are the agreed steps in the performance management process and the agreed steps in the substandard performance process for teachers. The aim was success for all students, by delivering effective teachers and making Clarkson a good school.

Specific, measurable, achievable, realistic and timely (SMART) goals based on data, and aligned with operational and strategic school planning, are a central part of school improvement. Hattie's theory is that teachers and school leaders who refine critical ways of thinking or develop particular *mind frames* have a greater impact on student learning. Data using effect sizes to maximise learning is central to the meaning and impact of the performance management process.

As Prof John Hattie said in correspondence February, 2016: "... all my work screams it is about how we THINK – not so much what we do or who we are, but the mind frames that we walk into a classroom or staffroom. This is why Invitational Education and Visible Learning have so much overlap – but of course I do not stop at the thinking – it is the actions, nay the impact of the actions from this thinking that are critical to evaluate and appreciate."

Teachers who are not inviting may simply be unaware of how their words and actions negatively affect a student's self-concept and engagement. They may not realise that how they are messaging students either invites



engagement or reluctance to participate and persevere in learning. Strategies for improved teacher success included the concepts of critical learning pathways and instructional rounds, are analogous to medical metaphors like the critical health pathway and the doctors' rounds on the hospital ward.

### The explicit need for effective collaborative practice

The Clarkson strategic vision focuses on achieving cultural transformation by investing in smarter people doing things in smarter ways to deal with significant and persistent problems. Integral to Clarkson's reform is the meaningful collaboration between all members of the school staff to share in shaping the school vision and to help set team goals and to work towards their achievement. As Peter Block said: "When we commit to bringing our deepest selves to the table we are transformed by the act of creating something that we cannot create alone."

Collaboration and teamwork underpin

teaching and learning with the better use of individual students' classroom data to improve decision-making in a professional learning community. Teacher standards shape professional learning goals and give opportunity for Clarkson teachers to look into mirrors of self-reflection.

Collaborating on de-privatised practice based on an Instructional Rounds model has been a feature of the program of classroom observation at Clarkson for a number of years and is aligned with the Western Australian Classroom Management Skills strategy (CMS) and the Department of Education strategic and focus planning.

Invitational leaders know that it is important to understand paradox and, that solely focusing on accountability will not achieve effective classroom reform and improve learning.

Inevitably, invitational leadership means travelling together on the Clarkson learning journey because, when we go together, we go much, much farther.

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