Children Come First:
Striving for Relatedness, Competence, and Autonomy

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Educators are currently presented with an urgent call and a unique opportunity to ensure that school policies, practices, and strategies for our youngest learners encompass what research and data tell us is essential to their successful development and learning. For all of its terror, deep sadness, and loss, the COVID 19 pandemic also provides educators with a unique and essential opportunity to boldly step up and make school a positive and transformative time for children, families, and educators.

Within the context of the cost of the pandemic to education, the lenses of equity, research, data, parallel processes, and aligned practices must be used to examine the essential nature of the feelings of relatedness, competence, and autonomy.

The long-term goal is to increase the number of early childhood programs and early grade classrooms with high-quality learning environments that contribute to reducing inequities, closing achievement and opportunity gaps, and supporting young learners.

Parallel Process

Alignment across the early childhood continuum has multiple definitions and purposes that go well beyond making certain classroom learning experiences tie directly to curriculum standards. One that proves crucial to optimizing P-3 approaches is the notion of parallel process. A parallel process is one in which the conditions considered desirable for one group are the very same as those established for others. Parallel process prospers in an environment that is culturally responsive, supports growth for adults and children alike and is one:

- in which people feel safe and valued;

- where competence and autonomy develop through relationships built on genuine trust and respect; and
- where excellence is believed possible for each individual and supported to become reality.

Continuous Improvement and Collaborative Inquiry

Parallel processes thrive in a culture of continuous improvement and collaborative inquiry. In an educational setting, continuous improvement describes an approach to problem solving and growth that represents an ongoing effort to improve outcomes (Best & Dunlap, 2013). In collaborative inquiry, educators work together to analyze data, identify challenges, and discuss the use of a variety of instructional practices. The objectives are ongoing and aimed at improvement and positive outcomes for students (David, 2008).

Thus, if the goal is for children to be collaborative, creative problem-solvers who are valued by their teachers and their peers for their thoughts, feelings, and ideas, then the goal is also for adults to be collaborative, creative problem-solvers who are valued for their thoughts, feelings, and ideas.

In pursuit of effective support for the education and development of our youngest learners, it is important to make use of the idea of parallel process to look for the ways in which children, teachers, and administrators can all thrive in an environment where individual needs can only be met if the needs of all are also met. Basic Psychological Need Theory (Vansteenkiste & Soenens, 2020) utilizes Self-Determination Theory (Ryan & Deci, 2000) to examine the three universal needs of **Relatedness, Competency, and Autonomy**.

Relatedness: Relatedness involves sincere caring about and for others, and having others reciprocate those feelings. Relatedness enables individuals to interact effectively with others, to give and accept responsibility, to cooperate, to have compassion, and to show respect. These abilities enable people to function as productive members of a community.

Table 1 provides examples of the parallel experiences vital to the development of relatedness for the full school community: children, teachers, administrators, and families.

Table 1: Parallel Experiences and Relatedness

Children	Teachers	Administrators	Families
Children have the opportunity to learn and grow with other children in an environment where they feel safe, nurtured, valued, and free to make mistakes while learning.	Teachers have the opportunity to learn and grow with other adults in an environment where they feel safe, nurtured, valued, and free to make mistakes while learning.	Administrators have the opportunity to learn and grow with other adults in an environment where they feel safe, nurtured, valued, and free to make mistakes while learning.	Educators demonstrate and model their commitment to an environment where family members feel safe, nurtured, and valued.
Each child in the school community is valued by others, is recognized for his/her strengths, and supported through his/her challenges.	Each teacher in the school community is valued by others and is recognized for his/her strengths and supported through his/her challenges.	Each administrator in the school community is valued by others and is recognized for his/her strengths and supported through his/her challenges.	Educators use their knowledge of each child and family to make learning experiences meaningful, accessible, and responsive to each and every child.

Competence: Competence concerns one's experience of effectiveness and mastery. Competent people experience and recognize success and have opportunities to demonstrate their skill and expertise. This need becomes satisfied as one capably engages in activities, experiences, and opportunities for using and extending skills and expertise.

Table 2 provides examples of the parallel experiences vital to the development of competence for the full school community: children, teachers, administrators, and families.

Table 2: Parallel Experiences and Competence

Children	Teachers	Administrators	Families
Children, especially children of color, experience curriculum, instruction, and assessment that is strength-based and culturally relevant.	Teachers experience themselves as valued for their particular contributions.	Administrators experience themselves as valued for their particular contributions.	Family members feel confident that they are valued as important resources for their own child/children.
Children have regular opportunities to demonstrate their skill and expertise	Teachers feel confident that they are well-versed in strength-based, culturally relevant curriculum, instruction, and assessment.	Administrators feel confident, informed, and knowledgeable about strength-based, culturally relevant curriculum, instruction, and assessment. Administrators feel confident in supporting teachers' efforts to provide successful experiences for all children.	Family members feel confident that they are valued as important resources for teachers and administrators in terms of strength-based, culturally relevant curriculum, instruction, and assessment.

Autonomy: When one strives to gain a sense of oneself as a separate, self-governing individual who is able to effect change. When people see themselves as autonomous, they are more able to explore and acquire new skills. Autonomy has two vital aspects:

(1) there is an emotional component whereby one relies more on themselves rather than others, and
(2) a behavioral component whereby one makes decisions independently by using their judgement.

Table 3 provides examples of the parallel experiences vital to the development of autonomy for the full school community: children, teachers, administrators, and families.

Table 3: Parallel Experiences and Autonomy

Children	Teachers	Administrators	Families
Children have regular, and intentional opportunities to make choices, and decisions.	Teachers have regular and intentional opportunities to make choices and decisions.	Administrators have regular and intentional, opportunities to make choices and decisions.	Family members have regular and intentional opportunities to make choices and decisions.
Children are supported in their efforts to develop autonomy and self-regulation skills.	Teachers understand why promoting student choice supports the development of self-regulation and autonomy.	Administrators have background knowledge in the importance and value of choice, self-regulation, and autonomy.	Family members understand the need for young children to experience opportunities for choice, self-regulation, and autonomy.
	Teachers regularly and intentionally provide opportunities for children to develop self-regulation and autonomy.	Administrators support and empower teachers to promote student choice and provide opportunities for children to develop self-regulation and autonomy.	

These ideas are not merely theoretical. Rather, they serve as a guide for how to respond to the challenges encountered by children and adults. They provide a structure for examining challenges through the lenses of **Relatedness**, **Competence**, and **Autonomy** in order to effectively determine where the problem lies and provide beneficial responses.

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INQUIRING INTO POLICIES, PRACTICES, AND STRATEGIES

How does this apply to your learning environment?

- What opportunities are provided for children, teachers, administrators, and family members that reflect the notion of parallel process?
    - What opportunities are provided for children, teachers, and administrators to experience a sense of relatedness in your learning environment?
    - What opportunities are provided for children, teachers, and administrators to experience a sense of competence in your learning environment?
    - What opportunities are provided for children, teachers, and administrators to experience a sense of autonomy in your learning environment?
- Relatedness: What is working/not working for a particular child/adult?
    - What strategies could be implemented to support the child/adult in being successful?
- Competence: What is working/not working for a particular child/adult?
    - What strategies could be implemented to support the child/adult in being successful?
- Autonomy: What is working/not working for a particular child/adult?
    - What strategies could be implemented to support the child/adult in being successful?
- In your setting, in what ways do you see the ideas behind parallel processes in action?

For further information, see this other brief in our **Children Come First** series: Parallel Process, Continuous Improvement, and Collaborative Inquiry at https://region6cc.uncg.edu/resources/, or visit the Early Childhood web page at: https//region6cc.uncg.edu/early childhood/.

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