



# Children Come First: Mindset: Parallel Process, Continuous Improvement, and Collaborative Inquiry

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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, equity, research, data, parallel processes, and aligned practices, are the lenses through which the learning and development of the entire school community must be considered.**

Our long-term goal is to increase the number of early childhood programs/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 is supported to become reality.

As instructional leaders, principals, teachers, early childhood directors, along with curriculum specialists and central office personnel, must create and nurture a school culture in which professional development and collaboration interact and thrive. This means synchronicity in how the central office works with administrators, how administrators work with staff and families, and how teachers work with their students. This alignment is critical to the development of a climate where high expectations for adults and children alike are coupled with interactions that convince them of their own capacity to grow and improve. Central to this is a mindset of continuous improvement and a commitment to collaborative inquiry.

Figure 1: Our Wants for Children, Staff, and Families

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## WHAT WE WANT FOR OUR CHILDREN, WE ALSO WANT FOR STAFF AND FAMILIES.

Everyone feels cared for, responded to, safe, and valued.

Competence and autonomy are nurtured through relationships built on trust and respect.

Excellence is believed possible for each individual and is supported to become reality.

Experiences convince each person of their own capacity to grow and improve.



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### Continuous Improvement

A mindset of continuous improvement reasons that children and adults benefit from messages that help develop self-efficacy and instills the belief that:

- I can succeed at this.
- My ability grows with my effort.
- I belong in this school community.
- The work has value for me.

This requires a risk-taking climate where:

- different thoughts and opinions are valued,
- the right answer is not as important as how you got there,
- doing your best is what is important, and
- understanding that everyone makes mistakes (Hammond, 2014).

People who operate with a mindset of continuous improvement actively look for their own shortcomings. They watch diligently for success when it occurs and know it happens due to intentionality and hard work. By watching and noticing, they are primed to act on these occurrences, resulting in work that improves rather than stagnates due to complacency. Figure 2 illustrates the differences between a fixed mindset and one that emphasizes continuous improvement and growth.

Figure 2: Fixed vs. Growth Mindsets (Dweck, 2016)



## Collaborative Inquiry

The overall goal of collaborative inquiry is to increase intellectual curiosity, acknowledge competence, and promote openness and a willingness to share. Discussions need to value the expertise and viewpoint of each participant, take context into account, and impact decision-making. It is the role of leadership to facilitate in their staff the acquisition process of knowledge, skills, and habits necessary to support their efforts to help each child to grow into a fulfilled, competent, productive adult. Promoting change requires the dedication of both teachers and the administration, an understanding of the implications of practices for student growth and success, and an environment that supports teachers as they experience both successes and challenges during their journey toward improved classroom interactions and instruction.

A culture of collaborative inquiry and a mindset of continuous improvement for children and adults thrive on that which is interesting, engaging, and meaningful. Educators should be mindful to:

- use research to guide practice, and advocate for children;
- view and utilize data as a source of inquiry rather than evaluation;
- investigate how environments, data, practice, and policy illuminate disparities; and
- ensure children have consistent opportunities to collaborate and interact with materials and topics that are interesting, relevant, and engaging for them.



## INQUIRING INTO POLICIES, PRACTICES, AND STRATEGIES

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#### How does this apply to your learning environment?

- Think about each of the following and discuss what's working and what needs improvement. How do you know that:
  - All adults/children in the learning environment feel safe and valued?
  - Child/adult competence and autonomy develop through relationships built on genuine trust and respect?
  - Excellence is believed possible for each individual and supported to become reality?
- How is a mindset of continuous improvement for children and adults evident in your setting?
- Describe examples of when the combination of parallel process, a mindset of continuous improvement, and a culture of collaborative inquiry interact to provide optimal experiences for children and adults. If you do not have evidence of these kinds of interactions, look to the three areas and see which ones are working for you and which ones are not.

Using this combination of ideas to examine your own practices and policies could provide you with a good example of how it might work.

For further information see the white paper in our **Children Come First** series: Striving for Relatedness, Competency, and Autonomy at <https://region6cc.uncg.edu/resources/>, or visit the Early Childhood web page at: <https://region6cc.uncg.edu/early childhood/>.

## REFERENCES

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