Children Come First:
Setting the Stage for Positive Change:
Parallel Process, Continuous Improvement, Collaborative Inquiry, and Universal Needs

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During the pandemic, the Region 6 Comprehensive Center (RC6) assembled a team of early learning professionals who determined the need for a statewide early learning collaborative to ensure that school policies, practices, and strategies for PK-3 learners encompass what research and data tell us is essential to their successful development and learning through the pandemic and beyond. In 2021, U.S. Secretary of Education Miguel Cardona urged educators to use the pandemic as an opportunity to "reimagine education," which reinforced the work of the RC6.

This resulted in resources that include a white paper titled "Children Come First: Ensuring School Policies, Practices, and Strategies Lead to Positive 3rd Grade Outcomes," and the ongoing development of corresponding briefs responding to the specific needs of multi-disciplinary early childhood educators. Resources can be accessed on the Region 6 Comprehensive Center (RC6) website.

Our 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.

This initial brief addresses the need to set the stage for working effectively with teams in ways that ensure a mindset of parallel process, continuous improvement, and collaborative inquiry within an environment that is distinguished by positive relationships, and a sense of competence and autonomy for all.

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Figure below depicts the Parallel Process and the mindset of continuous improvement, collaborative inquiry, and universal needs.
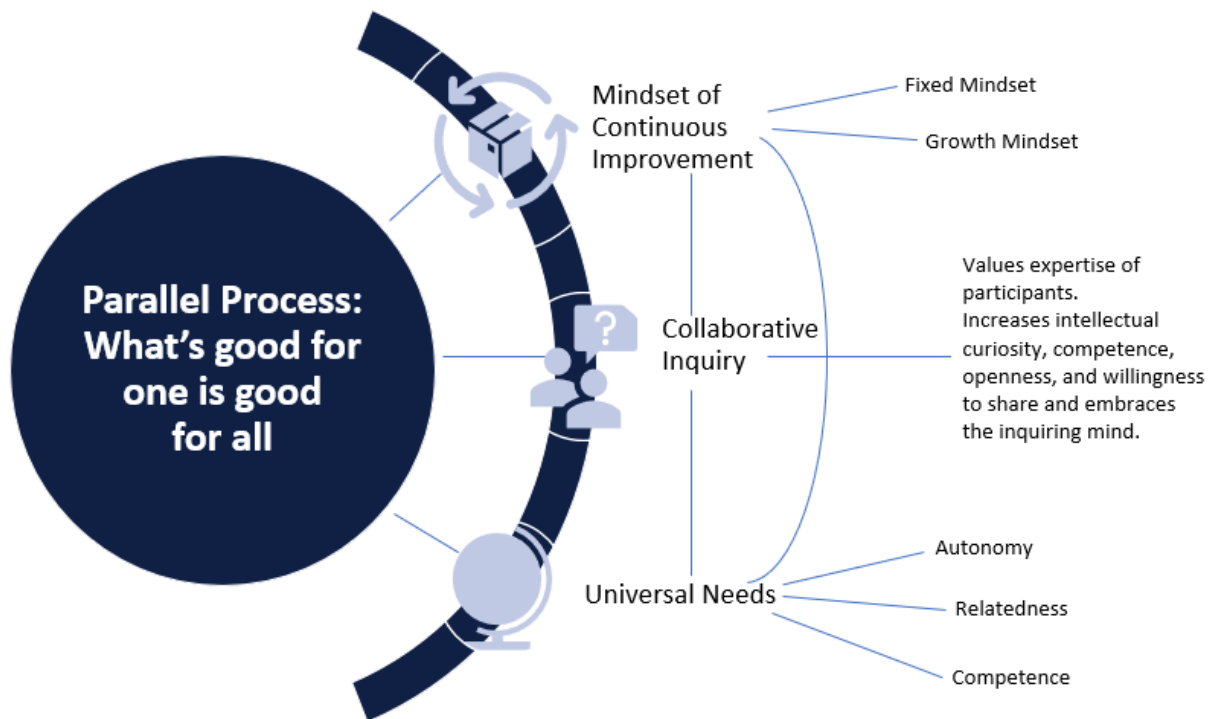
↑↓ Parallel Process

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 PK-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. 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.

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.

Parallel process prospers in an environment that is culturally responsive, supports growth for adults and children alike, and is one where:

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 supported to become reality.

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

Continuous Improvement

Within a mindset of continuous improvement, both children and adults benefit from messages and experiences that help develop self-efficacy that instills belief that:

- ☑ I can succeed at this.
- ☑ My ability grows with my effort.
- ☑ I belong in this school community.
- ☑ What I do 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 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 that 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.

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 for their staff the acquisition of the knowledge, skills, and habits necessary to support efforts to help each child to grow into a fulfilled, competent, productive adult. Promoting change requires the dedication of multi-disciplinary educators, an understanding of the implications of practices for student growth and success, and an environment that supports adults as they experience both successes and challenges during their journey toward improved interactions between and among adults and children.

A CULTURE OF COLLABORATIVE INQUIRY

Values expertise of the participants	Provides opportunities for meaningful participation in decision-making	Conveys high expectations
Increases intellectual curiosity, competence, and openness and willingness to share	Embraces the inquiring mind	*Remember …it is a parallel process*

Educators actively construct professional knowledge through treating their schools and classrooms as places for investigation.

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 aimed towards providing high quality learning environments for young children:

- ☑ 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.
- ☑ Ensure that children have consistent opportunities to collaborate and interact with materials and topics that are interesting, relevant, and engaging for them.

◉ Universal Needs: Putting it All Together

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

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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**.

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.

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 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.	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.
		Administrators feel confident in supporting teachers' efforts to provide successful experiences for all children.	

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

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.

Autonomy: When one strives to gain a sense of oneself as a separate, self-governing individual who is able to effect change.

Summary

Setting the stage for positive change through ensuring a mindset of parallel process, continuous improvement, collaborative inquiry, and universal needs can benefit early learners and result in an educational environment distinguished by increased positive relationships, and a sense of competence and autonomy.

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INQUIRING INTO POLICIES, PRACTICES, AND STRATEGIES:

How are you setting the stage for positive change?

- ➡ Think about each of the following and discuss what's working and what needs improvement: (Remember that family members are part of the school community).
    - ☑ 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?
- ➡ When considering Universal Needs, what opportunities are provided for children, teachers, administrators, and family members that reflect the notion of parallel process?
- ➡ 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?
- ➡ 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.

For further information see our white paper *Children Come First: Ensuring School Policies, Practices, and Strategies Lead to Positive 3rd Grade Outcomes*. Greensboro, NC: SERVE at UNC Greensboro, or visit the Early Childhood web page.

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A copy of this publication can be downloaded from the Region 6 Comprehensive Center website at: **https://region6cc.uncg.edu/resources/**.