

**Tracing a Journey of Curriculum Redesign in Education:  
Are We There Yet?**

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**Abstract**

The phrase “Are we there yet?” is used by travelers, often children who pose the question to gauge the distance and time remaining in a trip. How far have we traveled? How much longer will it be until we arrive at our destination? This article describes curriculum redesign for our early childhood and elementary education programs at Winthrop University in South Carolina. The details of this journey offer a roadmap of the program revision process that we encountered in our efforts to work toward continuous improvement in teacher education. By working with program faculty from within our college as well as faculty from the College of Arts and Sciences we accomplished our goals for curriculum redesign. As we enter the final phase of this 2-year endeavor, our writing documents the process that we encountered to achieve this goal.

Travelers, often children, pose questions to gauge the distance and time remaining in a trip, “Are we there yet?” How far have we traveled? How much longer will it be until we arrive at our destination? This case study describes curriculum redesign for our early childhood and elementary education programs at Winthrop University in South Carolina. The details of this journey offer a chronicle of the program revision process that a task force of faculty encountered in their efforts to work toward continuous improvement in teacher education. By working with program faculty from within the College of Education as well as faculty from the College of Arts and Sciences, members of a task force accomplished their goals for curriculum redesign. As the group enters the final phase of this two-year endeavor, our article documents the process that the task force encountered to achieve this goal.

For many years, teacher preparation programs have emphasized segmented academic preparation and course work with loosely connected school-based experiences. Critics, policymakers, teachers, and school leaders have raised concerns that today’s teacher education programs are inadequately preparing educators to keep pace with 21<sup>st</sup> century classrooms and new technologies as well as ensuring that novice teachers are well-prepared to strengthen student learning (NCATE, 2010). The National Research Council (NRC) report (2010), *Preparing Teachers: Building Evidence for Sound Policy*, identified clinical preparation (or “field experience) as one of the three “aspects of teacher preparation that are likely to have the highest potential for effects on outcomes for students,” along with content knowledge and the quality of teacher candidates (p.180).” The NCATE Blue Ribbon Panel (2010) recommends a national approach to teacher preparation reform that includes clinically based preparation interwoven with academic content and professional courses. This clinically-based approach requires that teacher education programs work in close partnership with schools and school districts as well as engage in shared decision making in the redesign of teacher preparation, selection of and placement of candidates in their schools, assessment of candidate performance and progress, and documentation of candidate impact on student learning. Based on these recommendations and the teacher education faculty’s efforts to work toward continuous improvement in teacher education, the task force set out to redesign the curriculum for two initial certification programs through a clinically based, partnership approach.

## **Background**

The Richard W. Riley College of Education (COE) at Winthrop University in South Carolina has offered a Bachelor of Science in Elementary Education (B.S. ELEM) and a Bachelor of Science in Early Childhood (B.S. ECED) degree for many years. The teacher certification earned by elementary education majors is aligned with the Association for Childhood Education International (ACEI) 2007 Standards and South Carolina certification guidelines for students in grades 2-6. The early childhood program is aligned with the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) 2010 Standards and South Carolina certification guidelines for students in grades Pre-K – 3. Winthrop University adheres to the principles espoused by the Renaissance Group to improve the quality of teacher preparation (Renaissance Group, 2011). For example, the task force’s curriculum redesign effort involved faculty from multiple departments and colleges on campus in the implementation of COE initiatives to improve preparation of early childhood and elementary teachers.

As part of NetSCOPE (Network of Sustained, Collaborative, Ongoing, Preparation for Educators), a U.S. Department of Education Teacher Quality Grant obtained by Winthrop

University, the College of Education's dean charged an interdisciplinary task force of early childhood, elementary, education core, literacy, and special education faculty with the mission of transforming program design to align with recommendations of the NCATE Blue Ribbon Panel (NCATE, 2010). Awarded in 2009, NetSCOPE facilitates a network of educators and schools with the ultimate goal of improving student achievement. Beginning in 2010, the College of Education used the NetSCOPE grant to orchestrate changes in the professional education core curriculum. The NetSCOPE grant also supplied the funding and the impetus for making fundamental changes in ECED and ELEM programs. The transformative curriculum redesign began during the spring semester of 2011 with plans for full implementation in Fall 2013.

A three-fold rationale guided the program modification work: (a) to prepare early childhood and elementary candidates to meet fully the diverse needs of students in South Carolina schools; (b) to prepare early childhood and elementary candidates to demonstrate content and pedagogical knowledge within a framework of comprehensive field-based applications; and (c) to provide ECED and ELEM graduates with the opportunity to add on early childhood or elementary certification by successfully meeting Praxis II requirements for the South Carolina certification.

The first goal addressed the need to fully prepare candidates to work with diverse groups of students in classroom settings, including English Language Learners, gifted learners, students with special needs in inclusive classrooms, and students living in poverty. In today's schools, teacher preparation programs must focus on meeting the diverse needs of all learners to make instruction culturally responsive and to improve student achievement (Darling-Hammond, 2006).

The second goal addressed the need to prepare early childhood and elementary candidates to demonstrate content and pedagogical knowledge within a framework of comprehensive field-based applications. Faculty identified a need for program modifications to engage candidates in multiple and diverse field-based settings that are woven into courses on content, child development, methods, classroom management, and technology and to ensure that candidates work with diverse learners throughout the four-year program to prepare them fully for high quality standards-based instruction (Bornfreund, 2011).

The third goal provided both early childhood and elementary graduates with the option to add on certification for both programs by completing the required coursework for both programs and successfully passing Praxis II requirements for each certification. This comprehensive preparation provides teacher candidates with the knowledge and skills and deep understanding of how children develop across grades PreK-6 (Bornfreund, 2011). Based on previous collaborative work with candidates, graduates, and administrators within the COE community, early childhood and elementary faculty members concluded that offering increased certification opportunities for program graduates is essential for substantive improvement.

### **The Beginning: Implementing a Vision for Programs in ECED and ELED**

To facilitate the work, the dean constituted a *Curriculum Transformation Task Force* to represent the stakeholders in the process of program revision. A diverse group of faculty members representing early childhood and elementary education, literacy education, the education core, and special education comprised the task force. The group's approach to program revision began with a combination of small and whole small group discussions in which each program shared a vision for their programs. During these small group sessions, program faculty defined fundamental principles to establish a vision for their programs. Beginning with faculty beliefs, the group identified important themes to provide an infrastructure for program design.

After meeting in small group sessions, faculty met in whole-group sessions to present the principles that were developed in the smaller groups. During this debriefing process faculty looked for common ground and found that the two programs (ECED and ELEM) shared common ideals for making a difference in how their graduates approached teaching. Guiding principles for program design confirmed a commitment to diversity and standards-based learning within a framework of field-based implementation.

Based on these early meetings in which faculty looked for common themes, the complex process of curriculum design began. The term complex serves as a euphemism for the give and take among faculty members who asserted their own passion and unique insight in the program revision process. Going beyond sharing beliefs to providing a risk-free environment for fruitful discussions and innovation presented task force members with important challenges throughout the process. The following themes, illuminated through small group discussions, established the guiding vision for curriculum redesign:

- Academic Content
- Learner Diversity
- Additional Clinical Experiences
- Enhanced Literacy Content and Pedagogy
- Age-Appropriate Content Pedagogy
- Assessment of Student Learning

Monthly meetings raised a range of issues that small groups discussed and brought to the larger group for consideration. A summary of proposals that were presented to the group traced the meandering nature of ideas that came and went throughout the spring and summer of 2011 and continued into the 2011-2012 academic year. Each phase of the curriculum redesign process involved a give and take of ideas. For each proposal, faculty discussed pros and cons of the various ideas. Throughout this process, individual faculty brought forward a plethora of issues and proposals for the group to consider. Reaching consensus required time and patience.

Faculty considered and rejected some early proposals for a variety of reasons. For instance, in response to a proposal that outlined an interdisciplinary approach to methods courses in math, science and social studies, faculty members from various departments decided that content-specific methods courses presented the best approach to developing content knowledge for the elementary program. Another rejected proposal was to merge ECED and ELEM programs for a K-6 certification but it did not align with South Carolina standards for teacher certification. And finally, the group did not pursue the development of an *Early Childhood Special Education* program because of the additional hours that would have been added for completion.

Successful plans focused on implementing the group's collective beliefs regarding what teachers should know and be able to do in Pre-K-6 classrooms. The group maintained its focus on implementing an overarching goal of developing a content-rich, real-world approach to preparing teachers for today's classroom. Task force members succeeded in finding areas of commonality while maintaining the integrity of program specific standards. Some innovative ideas developed by the task force included the following:

- Comprehensive field-based experiences woven throughout each program;
- A leveled approach to content methods courses for ECED and ELEM (Students in each program take six hours of methods in math, science and social studies);

- A curriculum-integration course for ECED and ELEM majors during a year-long internship;
- A comprehensive literacy sequence for both programs; and
- Work involving faculty members from multiple departments in the COE and the College of Arts and Sciences, including the following activities:
  - Collaboration with special education faculty to develop an applied behavior analysis course to prepare teachers for challenging classroom behaviors;
  - Work with arts faculty to develop an interdisciplinary approach to teaching through an integrated arts course that replaces separate courses in art, music, dance, and theatre;
  - Input from mathematics instructors regarding mathematics requirements for both programs;
  - Development of a children’s literature course aligned with General Education goals to meet Humanities requirements; and
  - The addition of assignments requiring work with families of diverse learners to an early childhood course to align with the University’s Global Perspective requirements.

Following the tedious process of organizing a sequence for each program, the next steps focused on meeting national standards and state requirements for teacher certification for both Pre-K through grade three as well as grades two through six in both programs. Table One shows how themes and transformational program components align with recommendations of professional groups such as NCATE, NAEYC, and ACEI.

Table 1.  
Program Components and Alignment with Recommendations of Professional Groups.

Themes	Transformational Program Components	Alignment with Recommendations of Professional Groups					
		NCATE Standards	NCATE Blue Ribbon Panel	Early Education Policy Initiative	NAEYC Stds	ACEI Stds	Renaissance Group Principles
Academic Content	Strong content preparation	X			X	X	X
Learner Diversity	Skills to meet the needs of diverse learners (e.g., English Language Learners, gifted and exceptional learners in inclusive classrooms, students from diverse family backgrounds)	X			X	X	

Additional Clinical Experiences	Early field experiences in junior-year methods courses; year-long senior internship		X	X			X
Enhanced Literacy Content and Pedagogy	Literacy instruction for emergent, beginning, struggling, transitional, intermediate, and advanced readers and writers			X		X	
Age-Appropriate Content Pedagogy	Sequences of content-specific methods courses in both early childhood and elementary grades (i.e., PreK-3, 2-6)	X		X	X		
Assessment of Student Learning	Methods of formative and summative assessment; capstone course assessment of teacher candidate impact on student learning	X			X	X	

**The Middle: Meeting State and National Guidelines for Teacher Preparation**

By first looking at certification requirements in other programs within the state, the task force concluded that graduates would be better prepared for the demands of the contemporary job market with a broader range of grade level certifications than currently available. The group agreed that that its curriculum redesign would increase candidates’ opportunities for teacher certification and employment throughout the region by building in options for certification in Pre-K through grade three as well as grades two through six.

The overarching benefit for the program modification described here aims to provide better preparation for both majors in content and pedagogical knowledge as they develop deeper understanding of earlier and later developmental stages and appropriate methods for teaching all students. Planning a program that incorporates coursework for an ECED, as well as an ELEM, certification enables our graduates to meet South Carolina requirements for teaching Pre-K –

grade three and elementary grades two through six. By taking the appropriate Praxis II exams, our candidates can increase their certification options for teaching any grade in an elementary school.

### **The End: Providing a Plan for Evaluation and Assessment**

As members of the task force organized the curriculum redesign for the ECED and ELEM programs, layers of assessment emerged. The development of an assessment plan for candidates and their programs formed the foundation of ECED and ELEM program modifications.

The Praxis II requirements provide a useful tool to assess candidates' content and pedagogical knowledge. Based on the curriculum redesign, ELEM graduates will take coursework required for a South Carolina teacher's certificate (second through sixth grades) in elementary education and qualify for an add-on certification in early childhood education (Pre-K through grade three). Likewise, ECED graduates will take coursework required for certification in early childhood education and qualify for add-on certification in elementary education. Each graduate must take the Praxis II for his or her major program (ECED or ELEM) with an option to take the required Praxis II for the additional certification. Assessment plans use Praxis II along with other assessments to evaluate individual learning as well as program goals.

The College of Education has an established process for data collection, aggregation, and dissemination. Program assessment plans for key assessments, data collection, and analysis comply with *National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education* (NCATE) requirements. Since each program adheres to a different Specialized Professional Association (SPA), the task force decided that each program would maintain a separate approach to NCATE (now the Council for the Accreditation of Educator Preparation, CAEP) evaluation and assessment.

### **Are We There Yet?**

The Curriculum Transformation Task Force completed a successful journey toward curriculum redesign. During the Fall 2012 semester the College of Education received notification of approval from the South Carolina Department of Education and the South Carolina Commission of Higher Education (CHE) regarding program changes for the B. S. in Early Childhood Education and B. S. in Elementary Education. The task force achieved its goal to prepare candidates to work with diverse groups of students in classroom settings with full implementation of yearlong internships that immerse candidates in diverse school settings. Changes in early courses and field placements helped achieve the goal to prepare early childhood and elementary candidates to demonstrate content and pedagogical knowledge within a framework of field-based applications. Candidates in ECED and ELEM develop content and pedagogical knowledge with six hours of content methods in math, science, and social studies. Program changes also achieve the third goal of providing both early childhood and elementary graduates with the option to obtain certification in both programs by completing the required coursework for both programs and successfully passing Praxis II requirements for each certification. Nonetheless, the achievement of program goals also presented challenges and learning opportunities that the group continues to encounter.

During this complex process of curriculum redesign, faculty encountered challenges with both the process and the product of curriculum design. Maintaining distinctive program elements for both programs, such as the Specialized Program Assessment (SPA) for NCATE and as the COE makes the transition toward the CAEP Accreditation and South Carolina state certification

requirements, presented challenges to innovation in program design. Ongoing collective reflection resulted in the development of additional curriculum action items and revised program checklists that align program changes within the context of University requirements. In addition to course changes, faculty members have developed fundamental changes to course schedules as well as field experience implementation in 2013. The development of program checklists that guide this transition has revealed issues that will require continued attention between now and the time that the program is fully implemented. In conclusion, members of the task force offer two fundamental lessons learned from this program modification experience.

### 1. Curriculum design requires an equal exchange of ideas.

Members of the *Curriculum Transformation Task Force* comprised a useful range of stakeholders from the COE faculty including the Dean's office, early childhood, elementary, literacy, and special education faculty. At times the group seemed too large to foster useful dialogue in whole group settings; a smaller steering committee allowed all members to feel engaged in an equal exchange of ideas by strengthening communication among group members. Program faculty meet in small groups to discuss implementation issues prior to meetings that include broader representation (such as program coordinators and department chairs).

### 2. Curriculum design is a recursive process.

Faculty must carefully tie each course in the curriculum design back to the original goals for program design. The complex nature of developing programs that meet college, university, state, and national guidelines requires committed, flexible, and positive interdependence throughout the process. Faculty must examine each change and project the potential impact on the curriculum of multiple programs. Timing is essential in recognizing the recursive nature of curriculum design. Embedded within this process, faculty must include time for thoughtful evaluation of changes throughout the process and be prepared to make adjustments based on that reflection. In addition, faculty must allot sufficient time for reflection and assessment of program changes prior to voting on changes in order to avoid mistakes that must be rectified through additional curriculum action.

This case story describes curriculum redesign for early childhood and elementary education programs at Winthrop University in South Carolina. The case story offers a roadmap of the program revision process that Curriculum Transformation Task Force members encountered in their efforts to work toward continuous improvement in teacher education. As faculty look toward full implementation of the curriculum redesign in Fall 2013, the journey toward curriculum redesign continues. Implementing the changes illuminates new avenues for collaboration as program faculty revise the catalog, plan course offerings, and advise students and other faculty of program changes.



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