

Developing a Program Conceptual Framework

John M. Johnstonⁱ

University of Memphis

Introduction

The purpose of this document is to assist faculty in reviewing or developing and affirming a conceptual framework for their individual programs. Six questions organize these guidelines.

1. How does your conceptual framework express the program's vision?
2. How does your conceptual framework express the program's mission?
3. How does your conceptual framework express the program's philosophical orientation, purposes, professional commitments, and dispositions?
4. How does your conceptual framework represent the knowledge bases (including theories, research, the wisdom of practice, policies and standards) that undergird and give direction to your program?
5. How are candidate proficiencies aligned with the expectations in professional, state, and institutional standards?
6. What is the relationship between the program's and the unit's conceptual framework?

Discussions among early childhood program faculty, and other university and professional community stakeholders about the answers to these questions are a crucial step in beginning a program self-study. Agreement and clarity among all stakeholders about program purposes, professional commitments, and outcomes for candidates is an essential first step in examining the opportunities for candidates to learn, practice, and demonstrate these outcomes. Answers to these questions are also essential to designing and implementing a system of on-going assessment of candidate proficiencies and program operations.

What is a Conceptual Framework for an Early Childhood Program?

A conceptual framework for a program is the interpretive lens through which experiences in the program are organized (curriculum, teaching, candidate performance, clinical experiences, etc.).

- A conceptual framework organizes thought processes in a program.
- It is a way of seeing, thinking, and behaving that encapsulates a sense of the whole program.
- It facilitates the fashioning of a coherent perspective into a program by relating its parts into a pattern or whole.
- A conceptual framework is a program’s meta-narrative or “story” and contains explanations of and justifications for the program’s operations in the world of professional practice.
- This meta-narrative should also suggest possibilities and working hypotheses to guide the study and renewal of the program’s practices and policies.

A program’s conceptual framework establishes the shared vision for its efforts in preparing Initial or Advanced candidates to work in settings for which they have been prepared (e.g., preK-primary public school programs, Head Start, child care, higher education, community agencies serving children and families, policy and advocacy organizations, etc.). The conceptual framework provides direction for courses, teaching, candidate performance, scholarship, service, and program accountability. The conceptual framework is knowledge-based, articulated, shared, coherent, consistent with the institutional (department, college, and university) missions, and continuously evaluated. The conceptual framework provides the bases that describe the program’s intellectual philosophy, which distinguishes graduates of one early childhood professional preparation program from those of another.

Faculty members in the early childhood teacher preparation program are expected to collaborate with members of their professional community—such as cooperating teachers and supervisors-- in developing a conceptual framework that establishes the vision for the program. The conceptual framework provides the basis for coherence among curriculum, instruction, field experiences, clinical practice, assessment, and evaluation. It makes explicit the professional commitments and dispositions that support it. It reflects the program’s commitment to diversity and the preparation of professionals who can effectively serve *all* children. It reflects the program’s commitment to the integration of technology to enhance candidate learning and optimal learning and development for children. The conceptual

framework also provides a context for aligning professional and state standards with candidate proficiencies expected by the college or university and the program for the preparation of early childhood professionals.

The conceptual framework for a program provides the following structural elements:

- the vision and mission of the program
- the program's philosophy, purposes, professional commitments, and dispositions;
- knowledge bases, including theories, research, the wisdom of practice, and education policies;
- candidate proficiencies aligned with the expectations in professional, state, and unit standards;
- the system by which candidate performance is regularly assessed.

Vision

1. How does your conceptual framework express the program's vision? Vision refers to the view of what professional practice in early childhood education should look like. A vision statement represents the program's future; what the program wants to become. The vision statement responds to the question: What should early childhood education look like? What should it take as its purpose? A vision is not a strategic plan. A strategic plan contains goals and objectives, which tell how and when some aim will be achieved.

In building or clarifying the vision for your program, think about and discuss questions such as these.

- What would you like to see the ECED program become? What reputation would it have?
- What contributions would the program make to candidates and its community?
- What values would the program embody?

Please note that not all of the examples provided in this document are specific to early childhood, but nonetheless illustrate features of the conceptual framework. Programs can adapt these illustrations to fit their own needs.

Vision Statement: Example #1. The early childhood teacher education program envisions the preparation of teachers who value and are committed to the importance of meaningful and relevant curriculum based upon children's interests and informed by knowledge of child development; the significance of responsive teacher-child interactions; the need for supportive linkages between home and school; and, the need to teach individual so that the uniqueness of their experience, culture and developmental differences are addressed.

Vision Statement: Example #2. Our vision as an early childhood teacher education program is to prepare teachers who are knowledgeable, critical thinkers; who work effectively to enable all children to learn; and who promote social justice.

Mission

2. How does your conceptual framework express the ECED program's mission?

While the program's vision provides a sense of the program's desired future, the mission delineates the specific task with which it is charged. In effect, the mission statement is a short statement that explains why the program exists, that gives special meaning, identity, and sense of self while being consistent with state directives and university or college commitments.

Mission Statement: Example #1. The central mission of the College of Education, the Department of XXX, and the ECED teacher education program is consistent: the preparation of Educational Leaders who demonstrate a thorough knowledge of the learning process, skill in instructional planning and delivery, and a disposition to create dynamic learning environments that incorporate multicultural knowledge into instructional design and delivery.

The primary goal of teacher education programs in the Department of XXX is to prepare educational leaders who will, through knowledge, skills and disposition, conduct themselves in ways that command respect for themselves and the profession and inspire others to take positive action. Similarly, the ECED teacher education program is designed to prepare educational leaders who are able to maximize the development and learning of children with diverse needs in a variety of multicultural program settings serving children from birth through age eight years.

Program’s philosophy, purposes, professional commitments, and dispositions

3. How does your conceptual framework express the ECED program’s philosophical orientation, purposes, professional commitments, and dispositions? In general, what is the purpose(s) of your program? What is the philosophical orientation, or system of principles that guides decision-making in your program? What values and commitments about professional practice do the faculty hold? The program philosophy is the lens through which the program sees the world of its professional practice.

Purpose Statement: Example #1. There are two related purposes of the U of XXX School Administration program. First, to prepare administrators for leadership in urban and diverse educational settings; and second, to prepare school administrators capable of creating school environments that evoke the abilities and talents of all students.

Philosophical Orientation: Example #1. The early childhood teacher education program is grounded both in the traditional, well-established educational philosophies of individuals such as Dewey and in the work of more recent scholars such as Delpit and Banks. These philosophical schools of thought contribute understanding that support faculty in maintaining a cohesive purpose: improvement of the life chances of African American and culturally diverse children through formal education.

We recognize the relationship between schooling and society. Although school as been looked at as “the great equalizer,” it also has the potential to reinforce societal inequalities. Consequently, faculty seek to tap into philosophies that prepare candidates to implement counter-hegemonic practices—practices that lessen the chances for our children to become victims of schooling, rather than beneficiaries.

In keeping with our institutional mission, the early childhood teacher education program strives to foster an ethic of social responsibility among its candidates. To this end, our program responds to Dewey’s call for teacher to engage in service and Ryan’s (1998) urging that students acquire and use all the resources of their culture. Our program also responds to Nussbaum’s (1997) claim that candidates must simply not amass knowledge, but also cultivate within themselves a capacity for sympathetic imagination that, like empathy and compassion, plays a vital role in our candidates’ ability to understand and respond to the needs of others.

Philosophical Orientation: Example #2. The mission of the Special Education Teacher Education Program is to prepare teachers who demonstrate the commitment and capacity to reform schooling and education for children with special educational needs from birth through young adulthood.

This mission is built upon a set of principles that guides faculty teaching, research and service:

- To collaborate with faculty within the COE and across the University, candidates, practitioners, and other community members and agencies;
- To model and promote research-based and reflective practice;
- To act as advocates for children with special educational needs and their families;
- To support healthy development and well-being of children special educational needs and their families; and,
- To promote social justice in the school and larger community.

The ECED program’s conceptual framework clearly articulates its professional commitments; and outlines the dispositions that the ECED faculty value in early childhood professional practitioners.

Professional Commitments: Example #1. Direction for the Early Childhood Teacher Education Program at XXX comes from institutional and professional commitments to:

1. knowledge and understanding of arts and sciences content, diverse cultural and ethnic groups, child and human development, and pedagogy;
2. culturally contextualized, developmental approach to learning and teaching;
3. transformative pedagogy for adult learners, connected to effective teaching that helps all children learn;
4. educator preparation grounded in supervised clinical practice; and
5. collaboration with families, communities, other professionals, and organizations.

Professional Commitments: Example #2. Program faculty are professionally committed to helping candidates meet these challenges by exposing them to philosophies, content, and experiences that enable them to understand, internalize, and function in ways that operationalize beliefs about (a) the universality of human talent and ability, (b) the critical role of diversity in the delivery of effective educational services, (c) the importance of educational reform, and (d) the essential commitments and responsibilities and commitments for educators. Program faculty both model and expect to observe in candidates dispositions that reflect these beliefs.

- Faculty value and are committed to belief in the ability, talent, and learning potential of all students. Concomitantly, candidates are expected to develop and deliver inclusive instruction that enables all students to grow and succeed.
- Faculty value human diversity and are committed to expressions of respect for diversity in its various forms. Concomitantly, candidates are expected to teach in ways that build on diversity as a critical aspect of learning.

- Faculty value and are committed to continuous professional development. Concomitantly, candidates are expected to engage in ongoing professional development activities.

Knowledge Base

4. How does your conceptual framework represent the knowledge bases (including theories, research, the wisdom of practice, policies and standards) that undergird and give direction to your program?

Typically, the knowledge base portion of a program’s conceptual framework does not stand alone as a separate section, but rather is integrated throughout. This approach can be seen in the examples of program philosophical orientation, purposes, professional commitments, and dispositions shown above. In the brief excerpts that follow, programs express its direction and professional commitments and supports them with references to the knowledge base supporting these directions and commitments.

Knowledge Base: Example #1. The XXX Program faculty works with adult learners in ways that will prepare them to implement developmentally appropriate teaching practices within diverse and multicultural contexts. The program also requires all students to have multiple, sequence field experiences. The sequenced experiences with children of various ages is part of the preparation of educators who can effectively work with all children, who in turn will develop and learn, becoming educated and active citizens of a democratic society.

Educators must be literate citizens, effective readers and writers in multiple contexts. Observation and research suggest that educators need comprehensive knowledge and understanding of subject matter, of child development, and of pedagogy. A deep knowledge and understanding of the impacts of race, class, culture, and diverse language on children’s learning and development are also essential for teachers (Comer, 1996; Darling-Hammond, 1997, 2000; Elkind, 1989; Meier, 1995).

Knowledge Base: Example #2. Subject matter content linked with pedagogy, educational history, and theories of learning and teaching are part of the preparation of elementary school teachers in the XXX MAT program. Elementary teachers need a broad and deep knowledge of content in the arts and sciences disciplines. In addition, an applied knowledge of child development and pedagogy that is integrated through supervised clinical practice is essential for educational professionals who will meet the challenges that lead to excellence in teaching (Gardner, 1991; Goodlad, 1990; Holmes Group, 1986); National Commission on Teaching and America’s Future, 1996).



Candidate Proficiencies

5. How are ECED candidate proficiencies aligned with the expectations in NAEYC, state, and unit standards?

Perhaps the easiest way to present this part of the program conceptual framework is in a simple chart with columns listing the ECED program outcome standards, then the state ECED standards, then the NAEYC standards.

Since the trend today is toward performance-based assessment, it will be helpful if the program outcomes are expressed in performance terms. When they complete the ECED program, what should candidates know (knowledge/content), how should they be able to use that knowledge in action (skills), and what professional characteristics or habits of mind (dispositions) should they demonstrate?

Alignment of Candidate Proficiencies: Example #1.

PROGRAM OUTCOMES	TENNESSEE STANDARDS	NAEYC STANDARDS
Candidates are able to use informal and formal assessment strategies to plan and individualize curriculum and teaching practices to meet the specific needs of all children.	Candidates are able to develop and use authentic, performance-based assessment of children’s learning to assist in planning and to communicate with children and parents.	Candidate knows about and uses systematic observations, documentation, and other effective assessment strategies in a responsible way, in partnership with families and other professionals, to support children’s development and learning.
Candidates are committed to reflective practice and continuous professional development.	Candidates reflect on one’s own practices, articulate a philosophy and rationale for decisions, and continually self-assess as a basis for program planning and modification and continuing professional development.	Candidate is a continuous, collaborative learner who demonstrates knowledgeable, reflective, and critical perspective on own work, making informed decisions that integrate knowledge from a variety of sources.

5. What is the relationship between the program’s and the unit’s conceptual framework?

Because the early childhood education program is a part of the teacher education unit, the program’s conceptual framework must be consistent with the unit’s conceptual framework. Some early childhood programs choose to adopt the unit’s conceptual framework rather than developing their own. However, in that case it is important for the program to show how the unit’s framework specifically applies to and is carried out in early childhood professional preparation.

Alignment of Program and Unit Conceptual Framework: Example 1

This mission [of the ECED program] is consistent with the unit conceptual framework which states that “the overarching purpose for teacher education at University ...is to produce effective educational professionals in a changing society.”

Alignment of Program and Unit Conceptual Framework: Example 2

The philosophy and purposes of the early childhood program are compatible with, but not identical to, the College’s Conceptual Framework in a number of ways. We discuss these ways in light of the five critical aspects of our institution’s framework:

1. Inquiry and reflective practice
2. Building curricula to meet the needs of diverse learners
3. Preparing knowledgeable and culturally-responsive professionals
4. Education for social justice
5. Preparing change agents (transformational educators) for social justice

ⁱ This handout was prepared to help teacher education programs in the College of Education at The University of Memphis and adapted for use in helping ECED programs think about their conceptual framework. This document is a compilation of information from NCATE presentations by Erskine Dottin, the NCATE standards, the NCATE handbook, and from institutional program documents.