

The impact of curricula and lesson planning in the teaching process

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Abstract

Lesson planning is at the core of teaching. It allows teachers to create an orientation path in the process of teaching, taking into consideration, many elements such as, students' styles of learning, previous knowledge, types of intelligences, interests etc. Effective curricula plans are characterized by principles of coherence, flexibility, integration of knowledge etc. Effective lesson plans strongly rely on previous information gathered through different forms of assessment, and provide inclusive opportunities for every student.

This paper will show how planning affects teaching and the quality of learning. First, a review of the literature will represent the importance of flexible planning and incorporation of differentiated elements of planning that ensure inclusive opportunities of learning for all students. Second, there will be a detailed analysis of findings taken by 25 full school inspections practices on the field of "lesson planning". This part of the study will specify the planning difficulties the teachers face and how this affects the process of teaching and learning. Third, benefits of lesson plans that rely on good assessment practices and integrate differentiated instruction according to students' needs will be discussed as ways of helping teachers adjust lesson plans to overcome their planning difficulties.

Findings indicate that teachers design lesson plans that do not rely on good assessment practices. Lesson plans are not flexible enough to respond and satisfy the needs of all categories of students, impacting that way the quality of instruction and learning. The paper will serve teachers to review their planning approaches and integrate elements of differentiated instruction as an organic part of the process, responding to traits and uniqueness students represent.

Keywords: curricula plan, lesson plan, principles of planning, planning approaches, integration of differentiated planning.

Introduction

Lesson plans are designed based on the same curriculum standardized by the Ministry of Education and Sports in the Albanian system of education. Curricula standards are backed up by content that is divided into units. Lessons are encompassed into units and are housed under the umbrella of the units theme, goals and prior knowledge.

Planning has been conceptualized to be developed in two stages: at macro and micro level. Macro- level planning focuses on a well thought division of units and concepts following linear sequences accordingly, and it aims at ensuring coherence that facilitates learning and contributes to the curriculum standards. Micro-level planning encompasses daily lesson plans; it derives from macro-planning, and is a well-detailed activity that is consistent to the macro plan. These documents interrelate with each-other and both derive from standards and requirements of National curriculum intended to be achieved during an academic year. Of a major importance

is the achievement of coherence between concepts' development following logic of their correlation as an important aspect to be met, because it affects the progress and the quality of teaching.

In the first section, the importance of lesson planning as a mechanism that allows teachers to follow the right path toward skilling students and meeting curricula requirements will be discussed. Furthermore, stages, factors and considerations while planning the lessons will be reviewed.

The second part of the paper will focus on a detailed analyses upon the approaches and practices teachers use to implement the lessons in the Albanian system of education. Moreover, a careful synthesis of the strategies they plan will be summarized in order to identify problems they face in conceptualization of lesson plans.

Finally implications about lesson planning will be suggested as a way of adjusting lesson plans according to student's specific needs.

Methodology

Data for this paper review were gathered from 25 school full inspections from the field of curricula and lesson planning: Full school inspection bring data on all the subjects learned at Albanian system of Education. The school inspections have been carried out in all the regions of the country including: Kamëz, Peqin, Kukës, Kuçovë, Laç, Tirana Qark, Lezhë, Kavajë, Krujë, Tiranë, Librazhd, Durrës, Gjirokastër, Pogradec, Lushnjë, dhe Korçë, Elbasan, Malësi e Madhe, Berat, dhe Skrapar. The map of data represents all regions in the country, meanwhile it should be emphasized that the schools to be inspected were randomly selected. 113 lesson plans have been directly observed and analyzed following instruments such as:

- Curriculums' planning is designed considering principles such as: linearity, flexibly, reinforcement and expansion of knowledge, cross curricular integration of concepts;
- Curricula is planned flexibly providing extra-time for difficult concepts;
- Curricula is planned based on a variety of resources of information;
- Teachers are systematic in planning their lessons;
- The objectives meet the criteria of measurability and specificity;
- Lesson plans are designed integrating differentiated instruction for students with learning difficulties;
- Lesson plan are designed taking into consideration data gathered from systematic assessment.

Findings were calculated based on the frequency of strategies included in the plans. Lesson plans were carefully reviewed and notes were taken upon the qualitative aspect of the objective designing, the strategies and techniques used to enable the objective achievement. Frequencies of procedures were represented on percentages. On the other hand the structure, coherence and utility of lesson plans was considered and analyzed.

Literature review

The importance of lesson planning

"Failing to plan is planning to fail." The major role of lesson planning is to ensure that classroom instruction aligns with curriculum goals and objectives, enabling the students to be active participant in the process of learning since their direct experiences relate to lesson plans. On the other hand planning is also a good opportunity for teachers to refresh the knowledge and to update themselves on current research and findings.

Planning is a preparatory stage of instruction, where teachers reflect upon students' attainment, analyze how students are learning, think about the teaching approach they providing and try to adjust their instruction according to students needs. What are the benefits of planning? Is it a tool in teachers' hands, or an inefficient procedure not having a proper function? (Jensen, 2001) considers planning as an instrument that leads to unified procedures and lessons, but in fact planning should be a very specific and unique paper that fulfils every student' needs for learning. Effective planning relies on detailed previous information upon students' progress and attainments. Lack of information may lead to errors and unpredictability during the process of teaching. Sometimes the objectives set may not correspond to the level of students, because there is a big gap between previous knowledge and the knowledge we want to build. Choice of inappropriate objectives leads to activities, strategies and techniques that do not help students to advance in their learning. As mentioned earlier, knowing students' needs, their current level of knowledge, their learning styles, level and interests is very important. This information helps teachers to set real, measurable and achievable objectives. Skills and competences gained previously are essential to efficacy of lesson planning. It exits a strong logic correlation between concepts that influences the progress in learning. If certain concepts are not mastered, it is impossible to advance to more complex ones, since they relate strongly to each other and condition progress.

Stages of planning

Planning is a *process* and as such it goes through different stages. The stage of pre-planning is a product of deep reflections and analysis upon students' performance and attainment, sustainability of knowledge, the reinforcement of concepts, the compatibility of instruction to students' needs, etc. There are many considerations to be reviewed and is a variety of questions to be addressed that facilitate the choice of teaching approach. They relate to the content and the interest it may raise to students, the degree of students motivation, the complexity of the information and the need for planning differentiated instruction? Some questions that ask answers at this stage are: What are the most appropriate strategies and techniques that match students' style of learning? Do the selected activities enable objective achievement? What materials are needed to understand abstract notions? How can abstractionism be facilitated for students? Are students able to learn about the hard attack just by describing or do they need some visual help? How much time should be devoted to every activity? Do

the selected activities provide opportunities for students to demonstrate what they have acquired?

This stage of planning is the mechanical and the easiest part of the process, where teachers write down the procedures and rubrics they have carefully thought and selected, taking into consideration all the aspects we discussed earlier. It is the second step after conceptualizing and taking into consideration all the decisions teachers made at the initial stage.

The stage of post-planning relates to reflection upon the efficacy of planning. Some of the questions teachers should respond at this point are: Has planning enabled to implement all the procedures and activities in an integrated way to satisfy the fulfilment of the objective? Was planning a tool that provided appropriate teaching for each level of students comprising those with learning difficulty? Could the plan fill all the gaps created during previous learning? Did the plan provided opportunity for practice and feedback for every student? Did it lead to efficacy and skill gaining? Was the time properly managed and enabled practice and feedback from students? To what degree the objective were met? Did it allow time to identify and scaffold struggling students? Does this concept need some extra time? Did it enable a student-centred instruction making students the active participant? Could the plan maximize students' learning?

Factors influencing planning process

The curriculum encompasses many components such as: teacher, learner, context, resources, and teaching approach. All these elements have a powerful impact on lesson planning and can differ from one class to another, because of the specifics they represent. Zahoric ranges other aspects that influence the process of planning and pays attention to a certain individuality that impacts the way teachers plan their instruction. Other factors according to (Zahoric 1970), link to characteristics such as the length and type of experience, the levels of subject, pedagogical knowledge, teaching style, repertoire, and perceptions and knowledge of pupils. All these elements influence the planning style and make teachers differ from each- other in the ay they teach, Peterson claims that experience leads teachers toward a certain independency. Experienced teachers learn to juggle the classroom variables almost separately from the planning process (Peterson 1978). Of a central importance also is considered the dynamics of teaching, the context, and learners' motivation - aspects that affect planning properties. Another factor to be considered is the importance of flexibility within the lesson plans. Lesson plans are not rigid structures that should be strictly followed. Alexander (2000) likens interactional planning to the structure of a musical performance where the composition or score is analogous to the lesson plan, and the performance itself shifts according to interpretation and improvisation. Larsen-Freeman supports the unpredictability of the teaching process that influences the fidelity to the plan because he classifies planning within a complex system that is dynamic, complex, nonlinear, chaotic, unpredictable, open, self-organizing, feedback sensitive, adaptive, 'strange attractor'. Lesson plans should respond to learning needs of every group of students and in such context, a further consideration relates

to incorporation of differentiated planning. What satisfies the learning needs of one group of students, doesn't correspond do other groups. That is the reason that planning of differentiated instruction should be the answer to providing appropriate instruction to every student. As discussed previously there are many factors that influence the way teachers plan to teach students, but what is essential is that teachers should have gained the mechanism to make adjustment and adaptations that satisfy a qualitative process of learning.

Results

Difficulties in planning curricula implementation

Curriculum's planning is designed following principles such as: linearity, flexibility, reinforcement, expansion of knowledge and cross curricular integration of concepts

Findings bring evidence that teachers face problems to sequence units ensuring coherence, as a consequence of lack of familiarity with curricula philosophy and principles.

According to Calderhead and Shorrock (1997), Kagan and Tippins (1992), and Lampert (1985), many neophyte teachers have difficulty integrating subject topics, understanding the concepts or tasks embedded in curriculum materials, and juggling conflicting goals when there is uncertainty about how to achieve multiple, desired outcomes. As a result, there is often an elision between aims, goals, and objectives on the one hand, and teaching and learning process on the other. Similar difficulties have been detected in our analysis, but the difference is that the problems are faced by experienced teachers as well. *In 20% of curricula plans* the objectives do not match to curricula requirement, but are retrieved from books' posing problems to curricula implementation.

The main principles like linearity, flexibility, reinforcement, expansion of knowledge as well as cross curricular integration of concepts are not always taken into consideration in curricula plans. *In 23 % of cases* the arrangement of the units represents problems since it lacks an organic connection between concepts and does not follow the principle logic connection between concepts. *In 24 % of cases* some of the core objectives that relate to skills such as reading, listening and writing have not been integrated into the lesson plans, skipping curricula requirements and standards.

Curricula is planned flexibly providing extra-time for difficult concepts

Another important principle of curricula is flexibility which means that teachers can manage time more effectively and put more effort to complex concepts, in order to help students overcome difficulties and follow the pace of learning.. Findings indicate that *in 56% of curricula plans* the principle of flexibility has not been incorporated into unit planning, which impacts the process of teaching and learning.

Curricula is planned based on a variety of resources of information

Another problem reported relates to poor resources of information that provide opportunities to ensure objective fulfilment. There is a culture among teachers that the book is the unique source of information to be used. 85 % of teachers strictly

follow textbooks not providing variety of information to consolidate concepts. This makes teachers have little or no access to other sources of information, apart from books. It should be noted that curricula suggests a range of different sources to be consulted and used, but teachers continue to strictly refer to books.

Difficulties in planning daily lesson plans

Teachers are systematic in planning their lessons

Findings indicate that a small percent of teachers skip planning activity, not paying attention to the preparatory stage for a successful teaching process. In 12% of cases it is reported sporadic planning. Different studies indicate that many instructors become discouraged by the time required for good lesson planning. There are no studies that confirm the amount of time teacher spend in planning their lessons. For some teachers it is considered a time consuming activity, while for others is beneficial, in terms of serving as a guide toward achieving the objectives and goals.

The objectives meet the criteria of measurability and specificity

Research indicates that teachers face difficulties constructing objectives (both intellectually and semantically), (Kagan and Tippins 1993). The same challenge is faced in Albanian context, since in 52 % of lesson plans teachers struggle to design objectives that meet the criteria of specificity, measurability as well as constructing objectives that are achievable, realistic and time bound. Not being able to design objectives impacts planning, teaching process and the evaluation. Some studies, also have shown that many student teachers, particularly early in their training, have difficulty matching goals, objectives, and forms of evaluation; many also fail to understand the conceptual (and sometimes semantic) distinctions between aims, objectives, and goals (Joyce and Harootunian 1964, John 1991).

Lesson plans are designed integrating differentiated instruction for students with learning difficulties

A principal feature of a differentiated instruction is flexibility. Students get engaged in suitable activities and teachers design and alter instructional plans in response to learners.

“When teachers recognize diversity in their students, in terms of how and what they identify with and how they learn, and when this recognition is reflected in how teachers teach, students are free to discover new and creative ways to solve problems, achieve success, and become lifelong learners” (Ferguson et al., 2005). Differentiated planning is a necessity since students are very unique and diverse in their learning. It is widely accepted that learners differ a lot from each other in many aspects: such as learning style, prior knowledge, intelligence, cognitive skills, motivation, attention span etc... Individuality and specificities students represent should be an initial point of planning. Techniques and strategies that work for a group of students may not work for another group. The content that may be easily digested by a group of students may be very difficult for other groups. Isolated strategies or techniques can't be suitable for all teaching situations; because no single strategy or technique can meet every student needs in every learning situation. To ensure the greatest probability of learning teachers should incorporate a variety of activities that satisfy all students' needs and produce the desired outcomes. Differentiated planning leads to appropriate selection of objectives, content and strategies that respond to every

student. Teachers are there to offer the appropriate remedy according to students' needs. In many cases teachers plan unified lessons not including differentiated content and strategies for groups of students that have different needs compared to the rest of the class. Not paying attention to students who are struggling in their acquisition means not providing opportunities and inclusion for every student. *In 82 % of cases* it is reported lack of differentiated planning instruction even though students represent learning difficulties and teachers agree on that. Findings prove that teachers plan unified lessons not meeting every student' need for instruction and not providing active participation of all students.. In this context there is an urge to train teachers to incorporate and integrate differentiated content and teaching methods that ensures inclusion and opportunities for everyone. A key feature is the opportunity for practice, as it serves teachers to monitor learning and see if students are competent to use the newly acquired behaviour, skills, or knowledge. is the essence of effective planning. A close observation of students' performance provides feedback and help teachers adjust the teaching techniques accordingly. It also gives data to the teacher upon the extra time needed to devote to certain concepts and notion in order to accomplish the objectives.

Lesson plan are designed taking into consideration data gathered from systematic assessment
Another important consideration is that effective planning relies on good assessment and objective diagnosis. Assessments strategies serve to inform next steps for instruction. Many students are inactive in the process of learning, because they suffer from a wide gap of knowledge, accumulated during their learning. Successful planning procedures relate to careful application of diagnostic and formative assessment. Knowing where the students are provides a great source of knowing where to go. Planning without previous references about students learning impede teachers to offer appropriate assistance and scaffolding. Assessment is a crucial part of planning, since it serves as the ground for effective planning. Application of formative assessment and information teachers gather upon students' learning are a useful indicator that serves to successful planning. By doing so hierarchy of learning is taken into consideration and adjustments are planned accordingly. Findings from observation of lesson plans indicate that teachers incorporate the rubric of assessment formally. By doing so that all students work is not judged against the same assessment criteria. *In 72% of cases* teachers do not plan comprehension-level summaries, in order to provide logical reasons that lead to the fulfilment of the lesson objectives and the desired outcomes. Also *in 65% of cases* teachers do not keep records of student performance on test items. In this context their priorities of learning do not relay on data from systematic assessment, impacting seriously the quality of planning and instruction. Keeping records upon students' barriers in learning serve as a guide for further planning. These records inform teachers upon the adjustments it can be done to the instruction approach.

Conclusions

Lesson planning has been an evolutional and challenging task for teachers. Over time different approaches have been enriched and reviewed, in order to respond

to innovation and a better quality of teaching. We conclude that lesson planning is a cognitively demanding challenge in which teachers grow through experience and adjust the way they instruct. Research indicates that planning is a key feature of effective teaching. As (Carlgren 1999) points out, the practice of planning is as important as the practice of teaching.

We conclude that integration of individualized opportunities for learning according to class and students specificities in the lesson plans impacts the quality of teaching and student attainments. Effective planning is about making decisions based on well-thought analyses and careful details that enable the fulfilment of needs of every student involved in the process. Teachers continuously feel the pressure of making instructional decisions. These decisions should rely on systematic assessment, provide remedy and minimize difficulties students face in the process of learning. Diversity in students' characteristics should be supported by incorporation of individualized planning components according to their level and needs. The core of differentiated lesson planning is flexibility in content, process, and product based on student strengths, needs, and learning styles. Differentiated planning instruction will help teachers meet each student' need and foster their learning as far as possible on their educational path.

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