

*The 28th International Scientific Conference
“Educational Research and School Practice”*

**THE STATE
PROBLEMS
AND NEEDS
OF THE MODERN
EDUCATION
COMMUNITY**

BOOK OF PROCEEDINGS

Editors

Jelena STEVANOVIĆ

Dragana GUNDOGAN

Branislav RANĐELOVIĆ



Institut za
pedagoška
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STRUCTURING LESSONS OR STRUCTURING KNOWLEDGE – WHAT DOES IT TELL US ABOUT THE TEACHING PRACTICE?¹¹

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Introduction

Practically all didactic textbooks and manuals more or less explicitly emphasize the importance of structuring in teaching. Authors often stress that teachers should begin the lesson with an overview, gradually present the material, and repeat the most important parts of the lesson at the end of the lecture (Trnavac & Dorđević, 2010; Vilotijević, 1999). These procedures mainly pertain to the organization of teaching activities, and we refer to them as *structuring lessons*. In literature, there are also recommendations regarding students linking the current topic with previously processed content, students connecting the content with topics addressed in other teaching subjects, and so forth (Pešikan, 2001; Šefer, 1991). This form of structuring could be labeled as *structuring knowledge*.

Some papers have presented these two forms of structuring conjointly, within one single concept (Creemers & Kyriakides, 2008). On the other hand, these types of structuring could be perceived as manifestations of two quite distinct didactical approaches. Structuring lessons implies the expectation that the teacher would lead, manage, and control the teaching practice. Therefore, structuring lessons corresponds to adult-run practice (Rogoff, 1996) or traditional or transmissive education (Ivić,

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Pešikan & Antić, 2001; Havelka, 2000). Conversely, structuring knowledge reflects an orientation toward students, i.e., the development of their cognitive processes and intellectual capabilities. This approach could be viewed as a manifestation of a child-centered approach (Sugrue, 2002) or constructivist teaching/constructivist learning in class (Mirkov, 2013; Vilotijević, 1999).

The aim of this study was to investigate whether both forms of structuring were equally represented in the teaching practice in Serbia or whether one of them was predominant (and if so, which one). The significance of the results lies in their usefulness in discovering the predominant teacher orientation. Therefore, this paper implicitly addresses the more general question of whether the education practice in Serbia focuses on the activities of teachers (structuring lessons), student learning (structuring knowledge), or both two forms of structuring equally.

Methodology

The data presented here were collected within a large-scale study (project *IEEPS*¹³) involving 5,476 eighth-grade students from 125 elementary schools in Serbia (Teodorović et al., 2022). The students reported on the frequency of different activities in Mathematics and Biology classes by choosing an answer on a four-point Likert-type scale (1 – “never or almost never”; 4 – “always or almost always”). Table 1 features 8 items from the student questionnaire, with 5 items referring to structuring lessons, and 3 items referring to structuring knowledge. Data analysis included descriptive statistics and a paired samples t-test.

¹³ European Commission's Comenius project entitled Improving Educational Effectiveness in Primary Schools (IEEPS), 538992-LLP-1-2013-1-RS-COMENIUS-CMP.

Results

Table 1. *The Frequency of Structuring Lessons and Structuring Knowledge Activities*
– Student Assessment

Domain	Statements	Mathematics (N=2895)		Biology (N=2527)	
		Mean	SD	Mean	SD
Structuring Lessons	At the beginning of the class, the teacher provides a brief overview of what we will do during the lesson.	3.04	.916	2.94	.958
	At the end of the class, the teacher repeats the most important parts of the lesson.	2.6	1.010	2.88	1.010
	The teacher emphasizes the most important information during the class (e.g., writes it on the board).	3.47	.734	3.32	.865
	The teacher explains easier things first and then moves on to harder things.	3.33	.835	2.79	.923
	Everything we do in class makes sense and is well connected as a whole.	3.22	.816	3.26	.793
Structuring Knowledge	The teacher connects the content we learn with the content of other subjects.	2.34	.905	2.64	.867
	At the beginning of the class, the teacher asks us whether we already know something relevant to the new lesson.	2.34	.970	2.49	.966
	The teacher gives us tasks or asks questions that require connecting the content from several lessons.	2.49	.906	2.58	.923

According to student assessments of the frequency of activities of structuring, the two most frequent activities in Mathematics were *the teacher emphasizing the most important information* (M=3.47) and *the teacher explaining easier things first and then moving on to harder things* (M=3.33). In Biology, the most frequent activity was *the teacher emphasizing the most important information* (M=3.32), followed by *students realizing the connectedness of class activities as a whole* (M=3.26). All these statements fall within the *structuring lessons* category. The lowest points were attributed to the last three statements in Table 1, both in Mathematics and Biology (from 2.34 to 2.64). Students stated that

their teachers rarely *asked whether students already knew something relevant to the content in new lessons* and only seldom *helped students connect lessons with the content of other subjects and previous topics*. It should be noted that these activities refer to *structuring knowledge*.

We can conclude that students claimed that teachers in Serbia mainly structured lessons ($M=3.0868$, $SD .62848$) and devoted less attention to structuring knowledge ($M=2.4741$, $SD .71642$). The discrepancy between structuring lessons and structuring knowledge was found in both teaching subjects. A comparison of the composed variables of *structuring lessons* and *structuring knowledge* confirmed that the difference was significant ($t=66.143$, $df=5420$, $p<.001$). These findings have multiple implications for education policy and practice, as discussed in the final segment of this paper.

Conclusion and pedagogical implications

The practice focusing on segments of content, thus neglecting students' previous knowledge, can be seen as a manifestation of the traditional, academic-cognitivist conception of education (Havelka, 2000). Although this orientation has certain cognitive advantages, its shortcomings are quite significant. Hence, most scholars advocate a more active and productive alternative approach (e.g., Ivić, Pešikan & Antić, 2001; Mirkov, 2013; Ruders, 2003).

One could not expect this paradigm shift from teacher-oriented to students-oriented conception to happen on its own, nor solely as a result of the growing number of scientific papers that promote active learning in class. In order to achieve a higher degree of structuring knowledge and take student perspectives into account, a coherent education policy has to initiate, foster, and valorize this approach. If policymakers want education to be based on constructivism – or other theories of learning alternatives to the transmissive model – highlighting this orientation through laws and bylaws surely is not enough. The education system would have to promote this pedagogical approach through concrete measures, including effective and visible support provided to teachers as well as school management (Teodorović, 2021).

The findings of this study indicate that most Mathematics and Biology teachers in Serbia have developed the competencies needed for structuring lessons. It is expected

that these competencies come from their initial education and in-service training. This leads us to suggest stronger promotion of structuring knowledge in initial education and in-service training. However, there is an important distinction. While structuring lessons can be a mere technique for teachers to master (Kyriacou, 1997), structuring knowledge does not merely include concrete procedures, but also requires a comprehension of the importance of these activities. Hence, developing teachers' competencies in structuring knowledge could provide an impetus for a paradigm shift in their entire teaching practice.

Further research on this topic should compare these data with the data collected on other school subjects. Likewise, it would be beneficial to investigate other dimensions of structuring besides *frequency*, such as *focus*, *stage*, *quality*, and *differentiation* (Creemers & Kyriakides, 2008). Class observation, student and teacher interviews, and focus group research are some of the methodological techniques that would surely provide a more in-depth understanding of this topic.

In an attempt to describe an important aspect of the teaching practice in Serbia, this paper has offered some initial data about the frequency of the two types of structuring in class. The opening of this topic and the empirical data provided are aimed at recognizing the similarities and differences between structuring lessons and structuring knowledge and improving our understanding of their pedagogical foundations. These insights could allow for further improvement of the educational practice and further development of didactic theory.

Keywords: structuring lessons, structuring knowledge, teaching practice, conceptions of education, elementary schools in Serbia.

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