STRATEGY AND TACTICS IN FORMAL EDUCATIONAL PROCESS

Rodica Mariana NICULESCU, Ph.D.,
University *Transilvania* of Brasov
rodicanic@unitbv.ro

Abstract: *The paper is in line with the author's preoccupations for substantiating some theoretical aspects without which the practical activity in the educational field cannot reach real qualitative odds. This time, the approached concepts represent the milestones of the journey from the desire (planed educational process) to the realization (the real results of the educational process). In the first part, a definition of fundamental concepts related to planning/organization and monitoring on different levels of the educational system and process (the strategy with its different connotations, tactics, strategic plan, and implementation) is attempted. The role and importance of the strategic level in the educational reform and curriculum reform are briefly presented in the second part. The relationship between the strategic plan, the tactical/operational one, and the actual implementation is dealt with in the third part, with the emphasis of some considerations with the nuances of conclusions of long-lasting observations on the educational reality. The importance of knowing these theoretical aspects, so that practice does not pay a bitter price for not genuinely focusing on what it declares as a priority, is highlighted in the paper. In a world where the statements seem to be more important than the reality this kind of approach is seen as a necessity.*

Key words: *educational policy; strategy and educational strategy; educational/ pedagogical strategy and didactic/ teaching strategy; strategic planning; implementation*

1. Defining the core concepts

The specialty literature in education reveals a significant number of concepts used with a wide range of meanings which determine a real difficulty of understanding especially at the level of practitioners of education without in-depth training in pedagogy as specific science. The unclarity, or better said,

the ambiguity of the pedagogical language has been topic approached in part of my previous papers each time with reference to the specific topic in the debate.

I want to highlight, once again that, in the areas where sets of official documents are produced, at a general level, and these documents with design purpose, are to be implemented in educational practice without a clear using of the terms and a genuine and unitary understanding of their meaning by all the actors involved can't have an effective result. But even if this idea appears to be very common and not complicated at all, the reality shows the contrary. This is the main reason for my insistence of clarifying some important aspects, not for theory sake, but especially for educational practice effectiveness.

This time the focus is put on some concepts with an important impact both on the level of educational policy and on the level of educational practice.

1.1. Educational policy

Each nation and nowadays groups of nations with more and more flexible borders design general principles and policies on governmental or regional levels aiming to give common directions in the formal education sphere. They are directly and mainly connected to formal education, and less directly but in enough important way with non-formal education. It is still essential to stress that both their establishment (acceptance as principles) and their implementation within geographical and national specific areas depends on informal education which has stronger roots within the local culture.

These general principles and the way of thinking at governmental levels generate laws and rules that govern the way of functioning of educational systems along different historical periods. They cover the core meaning of the concept of educational policy which consists of sets of statements, included in official documents, based on general principles that manage the life of the educational systems at the national or regional level.

1.2. Strategy and educational strategy

Strategy as a concept seems to have the roots in the military sphere. This concept highlights aspects connected to the planning, organization, and conduct of military operations in war and consists of a set of operations and maneuvers, at the level of design, conceived to achieve a victory.

Starting from the accepted meanings in the military field, from where the concept of strategy originates and translating the significance into the educational field, one can define the educational and didactic strategies by

appealing to the three pillars of the initial definition: planning, organization, and leadership by referring them to the educational and teaching/ didactic approach.

Both the pedagogical and didactic strategies involve all three aspects stressed by the core definition of the strategy:

- *planning* expressed by the pedagogical and didactic design on all the educational hierarchy levels:

  ✓ educational laws and regulations (the highest hierarchic level)

  ✓ the national curriculum with the educational plan and the connected syllabi

  ✓ the teaching level- expressed by lesson plans

- *organizing* the context in which the strategy is to be implemented, meaning the structure of the educational system on the national/ provincial level

- *managing* this implementation in all of its sequences, as managing design, followed by the tactic level of the concrete implementation

Another concept constantly used in educational practice is that of *didactic or teaching strategies*, with the meaning of chosen teaching methods for different sequences of content within the lesson plans.

This concept (involving the term strategy at its plural form) generates often confusion, because it appears at the concrete level where the strategy is very close with the tactical level.

1.3. Educational/ pedagogical strategy and didactic/ teaching strategy

Probably this is the reason for a poor understanding of the complex meaning of the terms *educational/ pedagogical and finally didactic/ teaching strategy*. The long experience of contact with the practitioners of education showed me that the only meaning used and understood is this of the term the didactic/ teaching strategies. The value of a wider strategy, of the educational and pedagogical strategy at higher hierarchic levels in education, does not exist for the usual pedagogical language.

1.4.Strategic planning

Strategic planning defined as " the process of setting goals, deciding on actions to achieve those goals and mobilizing the resources needed to take those actions" (…) " describes how goals will be achieved through the use of available resources" . (Billingham J.,2012)

An analysis of this definition reveals that it can be applied to all the hierarchical levels of the educational process. Thus,

> Each law of education stets principles and general goals, deciding the general frame of actions aiming to achieve the designed goals and establishing the general resources (human and connected resources) and their way to be used in order to initiate, monitor, finalize and assess the real results vs the expected general results designed as goals.

No matter how these laws are structure (as a single common law for the entire educational system with all its levels, or different connected laws for each level) they essentially direct the planning, the organization and the managing activity of what is designed to happen within the formal education area (sometimes involving implicitly the non-formal education, as well)

As an example: In USA (6), as the federal-state, exists general laws containing directions of action according to established goals for all the involved states, stating general principals. Thus in 2001, the general principle was" No child left behind" was reiterated in specific terms by the state educational laws built often on each level of education as distinctive acts.

Other countries (e.g.Sweeden, UK., Romania, etc.,4,5) has one single law of education structured on educational levels, establishing the framework for compulsory education and the other levels. Also, aspects connected to the educational system, curriculum, human resources, regulations for financial aspects involved are to be found in these general directional acts for the education field.

The educational acts in fact plan the framework; organize the institutions and the hierarchy of monitoring and managing of what is to be happening for a defined period of time within an educational system. The law creates the framework of the entire strategy.

➢ Each National Curriculum with all its connected documents is another planning document, involving aspects of organizing and monitoring the process of curriculum implementation, but, also, it belongs to the strategic level.

➢ Each regional inspectorate of schools, each school have their specific strategic plan, more concrete and adapted to the specifics of the context they are conceived for.

The established goals are connected to what it is settled to be achieved on the superior hierarchic level; the decided actions are connected to the goals on one hand but to the local context on the other hand, as well. These actions take into account the affordable resources existing within the concrete context.

The design of a strategic plan is a very important step.

Sometimes, these documents put in words everything that it is considered to be well assessed by the person in charge with the assessment process of a school activity, without a real connection to the specificity of the defined school.

This formalism in designing has a huge destructive potential acting in two directions:

✓ for the committed teachers, staff, and students an" unrealistic strategic plan" could be a source of frustration because they cannot achieve the written goals in the given conditions of a concrete school. Their decrease in motivation will be an inevitable effect.

✓ for the less motivated people (teachers, staff, students, etc.) a "pretending" strategic plan means something lack of interest, a frame to refer to when they are asked to produce for themselves, also " pretending" reports. This situation is a strong factor of superficiality and lack of genuine positive results. BILLINGHAM J. (2012)

2. Role and importance of strategic level in curriculum reform implementation

A legitimate question could be: why is so important to separate these two plans: that of strategy and that of tactics?

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An old saying says that the"*the home accounting does not match that of the fair*" translated with the meaning that the design does not entirely mach with the concrete implementation. The *probable* factors of influence are taken into account when the design is done, but the *real* factors of influence act in the reality of the action. That is why a chance to adapt the plan to the real-life must be considered, even during the design process The higher the level of design is (example: educational policy, pedagogical strategy) the more flexible the pattern must be considered, with a wide palette of possibilities to adapt the future action to the concrete and specific contexts of implementation.

What is crystal clear appears to be the idea that it is difficult to obtain the expected results without a genuine understanding of these hierarchic levels of design and their connection with the tactic/ operational level strongly connected to the action represented by the implementation process.

Usually, concepts like strategy and tactics are used from the managerial point of view. The literature presents long debates and representative examples of the way they are expressed in managerial activity generally speaking and in the educational field, particularly. But in education, two plans of management are strongly connected:

- ✓ The management of the institutions of education involving the inside organizations (classes of students, teams of teachers on levels or subjects, leading committees, etc); this plan involves principals/ directors, middle managers as chiefs of commissions or committees, etc.

- ✓ The management of the educational/ didactic process where the manager is the teacher.

The second plan is of interest in the context of this paper. The topic approached is focused on educational management (as management of the educational process). The school management as an institutional issue can approach other specific facets of these concepts: strategy and tactics.

Each actor working within the formal educational field should be aware of the importance of knowing to design a strategy and adequate tactics followed by effective actions aiming to achieve at a high level of quality the established goals. A school principal is responsible for the goals at the level of the entire school, a middle manager is responsible for the goals of the structure/ organization managed, a teacher is responsible for the ultimate and the most important goals to be achieved, the quality of the competencies developed in the students' level.

All these levels of action and people involved are connected by strong, systemic and intimate inter-determinations.

3. Strategic and tactics levels- connection, functionality, and reality

An assessment of the documents settled for each the mentioned strategic and tactical plans already mentioned can reveal a lack of continuity and contiguity as a source of further dysfunctions.

This is not an issue only of the present but it had long term roots in the history in our educational system. Therefore, the focus on writing and presenting "perfect" designing documents seems to be is manifested as much as a central concern simultaneously with the lack of real interest in concrete qualitative results. This"pretending" attitude, a fake of quality when it is about the real results became a worrying situation. More worrying seems to be the lack of interest for the "pretending" risk itself.

Some selective examples could be useful.

Focuses on fashion issues like " total quality management" for instance is not negative in itself. The concept, even if still ambiguous, can reveal and help for great results.

TQM as a concept coming from business, defined in different ways by authors like Chase and Aquilano, Oakland J.S, or Miller W.J. (Miller W.S.,1996) entered in education as well, together with the omnipresent claim for QUALITY itself. Committees, many persons responsible, tons of files and documents, a multitude of decision as paper signed and carefully put in files, are to be found in schools. They should show how the concern for " Quality, as High Majesty" is considered and achieved. In theory (as intention and design) it is supposed to find in the educational institutions a well organized, flexible and extremely well-managed system based on clear principles aiming to demonstrate that every staff member (in education in our case) must be committed to maintaining high standards of work in every aspect of an institutional operations.

Each student has (must have) a personal file/ portfolio where his or her progress is registred and exhibit. Each teacher has also a portfolio as fat as possible, with a lot of diplomas, certificates, awards as proofs of the involvement in different and on fashion activities. Yes, these papers exist, especially when the institution or the person is in an assessment situation.

The Department of Quality has also an impressive number of bookshelves, tons of files, papers presenting proofs about how high quality the school work

is, how long term the teachers are trained (initially and inside of the in-service training system), in diversified ways. But an accurate and in-depth assessment can find much less than the files shows. The huge and constant demand for so many proofs on paper, or on electronic supports had an extremely negative perverse effect. Both the staff of the school and the students as followers of models became strongly preoccupied with appearances. Thus, the students are focused on having private tutors (as all the other kids have), on being involved in a great number of off-school activities (because all the colleagues or family friends are). The teens and the young adults are preoccupied on having diplomas, as many as possible, to obtain many master degrees, certificates of in-service training as much as possible, all put into fat portfolios. The concern for produced proofs became much more important than what the effect of learning process genuinely means. This is the most disastrous possible result. And the reasonable question arises: where the genuine quality is lost?

It seems that the quality was lost somewhere in the gap between strategy/ tactics, operational PLANS (strategic aspects on different levels) and the actual actions of implementation. This gap has the roots in the excessive focus on planning (only to be planned) and on the assessment focused on what the planning is, not what the real results represent in fact. The loud statement that the concern for quality is the priority should be connected to the proper and well-done assessment of the expected outcomes, highlighting their genuine quality. And when these are not at the designed level, the attention must be focused on the assessment of the appropriateness of the design itself.

The importance of knowing these theoretical aspects, so that practice does not pay a bitter price for not genuinely focusing on what it declares as a priority, is highlighted in the paper.

In a world where the statements seem to be more important than the reality this kind of approach is seen as a necessity.

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