

Learning Objectives as the Organizing Core of Instructional Planning: A Structured Narrative Review

Erwinda Rahim Tanjung^{1*}; Meyniar Albina²

^{1,2}Universitas Islam Negeri Sumatera Utara

*Corresponding author, e-mail: erwinda0301223100@uinsu.ac.id

Abstract

Learning objectives are often treated as a formal component of lesson plans, yet their pedagogical value lies in organizing the relationship among expected learning, classroom activity, and assessment. This structured narrative review examines how learning objectives function in instructional planning, with particular attention to elementary education and contemporary curriculum demands. Twenty sources through 2024 were synthesized thematically. The review identifies five recurring functions: clarifying intended learning, translating curriculum aims into observable performance, guiding the selection of learning activities, aligning assessment with expected outcomes, and supporting differentiated and technology-mediated planning. The synthesis also shows that narrowly measurable objectives can become reductive when affective, social, and developmental dimensions are ignored. Effective planning therefore requires objectives that are specific enough to guide instruction but sufficiently meaningful to represent disciplinary understanding and learner development. Learning objectives are best understood not as administrative statements but as the organizing logic of coherent instructional design.

Keywords: constructive alignment; elementary education; instructional planning; learning outcomes; learning objectives.

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Introduction

Instructional planning begins with a deceptively simple question: what should students be able to know, understand, do, or value after a learning experience? The answer is usually expressed through learning objectives, learning outcomes, competencies, or indicators. Although the terminology varies across curriculum systems, the underlying function is similar. Objectives make an intended change in learners explicit and provide a reference point for decisions about content, pedagogy, learning activities, resources, and assessment. In this sense, learning objectives are not an isolated element of planning. They are the organizing statement that gives coherence to the other elements of instruction.

The original article on which this revision is based approached learning objectives as a key component of educational planning and distinguished general from specific objectives. It also emphasized the role of teachers in translating broad educational purposes into more immediate instructional expectations. However, the earlier discussion relied heavily on older instructional literature and described objectives primarily as statements to be formulated. Contemporary educational research has moved the discussion further. The central issue is no longer only whether a teacher writes an objective, but whether the objective is meaningful, aligned with learning activity and assessment, responsive to student needs, and capable of representing more than routine recall. The shift toward competency-based curricula and learner-centered pedagogy makes this distinction increasingly important.

Classic curriculum theory already positioned educational purposes at the beginning of curriculum design. Ralph (1949) argued that educational purposes guide the selection and organization of learning experiences and

the evaluation of outcomes. (Bloom, 1956) subsequently offered a taxonomy for classifying cognitive objectives, while later revisions reframed cognitive processes as active forms of thinking such as remembering, understanding, applying, analyzing, evaluating, and creating. (Mager, 1997) emphasized the value of observable performance and conditions, a tradition that influenced the widespread use of audience-behavior-condition-degree formulations. These approaches made objectives more explicit and evaluable, but they also encouraged a tendency to equate a good objective with whatever can be written as a narrowly observable behavior.

The idea of constructive alignment provides a broader way of understanding the role of objectives. (Mager, 1997) argue that intended learning outcomes, learning activities, and assessment tasks should point in the same direction. In aligned instruction, students are not told to analyze a problem while being assessed only through recall, nor are they expected to collaborate when the planned learning activity offers no meaningful opportunity for interaction. Wiggins and (Wiggins & McTighe, 2005) express a similar logic through backward design: educators begin with desired understanding, determine acceptable evidence, and only then plan learning experiences. The significance of these approaches is that an objective becomes useful only when it shapes what students actually do and how their learning is judged.

Recent research reinforces this emphasis on design coherence. (Halawa et al., 2024) show that educational goals and instructional designs are closely related in K-12 STEM research; different designs are selected because they are expected to support different learning goals. (Børte & Lillejord, 2024) similarly demonstrate that digital learning-design tools are most useful when they help teachers align pedagogy and technology rather than merely add technological features to a lesson. (Rahardjo, 2024), examining Indonesian early childhood teachers' lesson plans, highlights the importance of alignment among lesson-plan components and shows that the presence of required sections does not automatically guarantee coherence. These studies suggest that the quality of planning depends less on the completeness of a template than on the relationships among its components.

This issue is particularly relevant in Indonesian education. The Merdeka Curriculum places stronger emphasis on competencies, flexible instructional planning, meaningful learning, formative assessment, and responsiveness to students' developmental needs. The curriculum's formalization through national regulation in 2024 strengthened the expectation that teachers translate broad learning achievements into instructional objectives that are appropriate for particular learners and contexts (Kementerian Pendidikan, Kebudayaan, Riset, dan Teknologi [Kemendikbudristek], 2024). The earlier guidance on learning and assessment also encourages teachers to connect learning objectives, learning activities, and assessment rather than treating them as separate paperwork requirements (Kemendikbudristek, 2022). The policy direction therefore corresponds with constructive alignment, even when the terminology is locally specific.

The growing use of digital tools and generative artificial intelligence has added another layer to planning. (Walter, 2024) shows that language-generating artificial intelligence can support lesson planning, but its educational quality depends heavily on teachers' ability to provide context, define objectives, evaluate suggestions, and align generated material with pedagogical needs. Technology can accelerate the production of a lesson plan without guaranteeing the quality of the objective itself. A poorly specified outcome may simply produce a more efficiently generated but pedagogically weak plan. Conversely, clearly articulated objectives can help teachers judge whether digital resources, multimedia, adaptive tasks, or AI-generated materials genuinely serve learning.

The same concern applies to active, inquiry-based, and project-oriented approaches. (Muhamad Dah et al., 2024) show through a systematic review that open inquiry can support student learning, but the design of inquiry tasks and scaffolding remains crucial. (Wijnia et al., 2024) likewise demonstrate that the motivational effects of problem-based, project-based, and case-based learning depend on how those environments are structured. These findings challenge the assumption that student-centered methods are effective by definition. The intended outcome must be clear enough for the teacher to design a learning environment that makes the desired thinking or performance possible.

Elementary education presents a distinctive challenge because objectives must respect developmental progression while avoiding an unnecessarily narrow view of learning. Foundational literacy and numeracy require explicit and assessable outcomes, but elementary learning also involves communication, curiosity, cooperation, self-regulation, values, and ways of participating in classroom communities. A technically precise objective may therefore be pedagogically incomplete if it fragments a complex competence into disconnected behaviors. The objective should help the teacher see what learning is for, not merely what can be scored at the end of a lesson.

The problem addressed in this review is thus conceptual and practical: how should learning objectives be understood so that they guide coherent instructional planning without reducing education to a checklist of observable behaviors? The purpose of the article is to synthesize foundational and recent literature on the role of learning objectives in planning, clarify the relationship between broad aims and specific outcomes, examine alignment with instruction and assessment, and identify implications for elementary teachers working within contemporary competency-based and technology-rich environments. The review contributes by repositioning

objectives as a design logic that links curriculum, pedagogy, and assessment rather than as a formal sentence that is completed before teaching begins.

Method

This article uses a structured narrative review and conceptual synthesis. The original publication described its method as library research and qualitative descriptive analysis. For the revised article, that orientation is retained but made methodologically clearer. The study does not claim to be a systematic review because no comprehensive database protocol, preregistered search strategy, or PRISMA screening record was available in the original research. Instead, the revised analysis integrates the core sources used in the original discussion with additional literature selected for direct relevance to learning objectives, instructional design, constructive alignment, elementary lesson planning, competency-based curriculum, assessment, and contemporary technology-supported planning.

Twenty references published no later than 2024 were used as the principal analytical corpus. The set deliberately combines foundational works and recent research. Foundational works were retained when they introduced concepts that remain central to the discussion, including curriculum purposes, taxonomies of learning, behavioral objectives, backward design, and constructive alignment. Recent publications were prioritized to examine how those ideas are currently applied to K-12 instructional design, lesson-plan quality, inquiry, student engagement, outcome-based education, digital design tools, and AI-supported educational planning. Indonesian policy documents were also included because instructional objectives are enacted through a national curriculum context rather than in an abstract educational system.

The analysis followed an iterative thematic process. Sources were read for propositions concerning the function, formulation, use, and limitations of learning objectives. Statements with similar meanings were grouped into preliminary categories. These categories were then refined into five themes that organize the Results section: objectives as curricular translation, the movement from broad aims to observable performance, alignment with activities and assessment, developmental and contextual responsiveness, and the role of objectives in digital and AI-mediated planning. The Discussion then interprets these themes in relation to the risk of administrative compliance and excessive measurability. Because this is a narrative conceptual review, the findings represent an interpretive synthesis of the selected literature rather than estimates of intervention effects or claims about prevalence across all educational research.

Results and Discussion

Learning objectives translate curriculum intentions into teachable expectations

Across the literature, the first recurring function of learning objectives is translation. Educational systems operate with multiple levels of intention. National aims may describe citizenship, character, competence, creativity, or social responsibility. Curriculum frameworks specify subject expectations. Teachers then need to convert those broad commitments into learning that can be organized within a unit, sequence, or lesson. (Ralph W. Tyler, 1949) curriculum logic places educational purposes before the selection of learning experiences because planning requires a destination. The same basic principle remains visible in contemporary competency-based approaches: a curriculum achievement becomes actionable only when teachers decide what progress should look like for the learners in front of them.

This translation process explains the practical distinction between general and specific objectives. General objectives communicate direction across a longer period, while specific objectives make that direction usable for immediate design. The distinction should not be understood as a choice between vague aspirations and narrow behaviors. Rather, the two levels serve different functions. A broad aim such as developing critical social awareness may orient a semester, whereas a lesson objective might require students to compare two explanations of a local social issue using evidence. The specific objective remains connected to the larger educational purpose while providing sufficient clarity for the teacher to plan an activity and identify evidence of learning.

The revised taxonomy of educational objectives helps teachers vary the cognitive demand of these expectations (Anderson & Krathwohl, 2001), factual information can be appropriate when foundational knowledge is required, but an entire sequence written only at the level of recall creates a mismatch if the curriculum expects analysis, evaluation, or creation. In this way, taxonomy is most useful as a planning diagnostic rather than a hierarchy that every lesson must mechanically climb. Teachers can ask whether the verbs and performances implied by their objectives represent the kind of disciplinary thinking expected by the curriculum.

Recent instructional-design research supports this emphasis on correspondence between goals and design., (Halawa et al., 2024) found that K-12 STEM studies select different instructional designs to pursue different educational goals. The finding is important beyond STEM because it shows that pedagogy cannot be evaluated

independently of purpose. Inquiry, projects, direct instruction, discussion, and practice are tools; their appropriateness depends on the outcome they are intended to support. An objective therefore provides criteria for choosing an instructional strategy rather than simply documenting the topic of a lesson.

From broad intention to observable performance

A second theme concerns the need to make learning visible. (Mager, 1997) approach to instructional objectives emphasized performance, conditions, and criteria. This tradition remains influential because teachers and students benefit from clarity about what successful learning entails. A statement such as "students understand social interaction" gives limited guidance. A more usable objective might ask students to identify forms of social interaction in a case, explain the reciprocal relationship among actors, and justify their classification with evidence. The latter formulation does not eliminate understanding; it provides a way for understanding to become visible through performance.

(Bloom, 1956) and Anderson and (Anderson & Krathwohl, 2001) similarly contribute to the language educators use to describe cognitive performance. The important point is not to select an impressive verb but to ensure conceptual fit. "Analyze" is meaningful only if students actually decompose information, identify relationships, compare explanations, or examine evidence. An objective that uses a higher-order verb while the learning task consists of copying definitions creates what might be called rhetorical rigor without cognitive rigor.

Outcome-based education intensifies the demand for explicit performance. (Sunra et al., 2024) describe outcome-based education as emphasizing measurable accomplishment and alignment between educational objectives, teaching, and evaluation. This orientation can improve transparency because students know what is expected and teachers can gather evidence that corresponds with the intended competence. However, the review also indicates a potential problem: measurable does not have to mean simplistic. Communication, collaboration, ethical reasoning, and creativity can be assessed through performances, artifacts, observations, and rubrics even when they cannot be reduced to a single right answer.

Elementary teachers face a particular need for developmental precision. Young learners may demonstrate understanding through oral explanation, drawing, sorting, modeling, performance, or guided conversation rather than formal written responses. The objective should specify the intended learning without unnecessarily dictating one mode of expression. (Rahardjo, 2024) analysis of Indonesian early childhood lesson plans is relevant here because it emphasizes the quality and alignment of planning components rather than their mere presence. A developmentally appropriate objective must be connected to what children can reasonably do and how they can show learning.

Alignment among objectives, learning activities, and assessment

The strongest pattern in the literature is that learning objectives acquire pedagogical power through alignment. Constructive alignment treats intended learning outcomes as the reference point for designing student activity and assessment (Mager, 1997). Backward design expresses the same logic through a sequence of desired results, evidence, and learning experiences (Wiggins & McTighe, 2005). These approaches challenge a common planning habit in which teachers select an attractive activity first and formulate an objective afterward to justify it.

Alignment can be examined through simple questions. If the objective requires students to evaluate competing explanations, does the activity give them competing explanations to evaluate? If the objective requires collaboration, is collaboration essential to the task or merely a seating arrangement? If students are expected to create a product, does the assessment judge the quality of the reasoning represented by the product rather than only its appearance? Such questions turn the objective into a decision-making tool.

Recent work on constructive alignment illustrates the continued relevance of this principle in technology-rich settings. (Pereira et al., 2024) show how learning outcomes, activities, and assessment can be aligned even when new tools such as large language models enter the learning environment. The technology changes what students and teachers can do, but it does not remove the need for coherent purposes. (Børte & Lillejord, 2024) similarly argue that technology in learning design should be aligned with pedagogy. The implication is that digital resources should be selected because they enable a learning process required by the objective, not because they are novel or available.

Assessment is where misalignment becomes most visible. A teacher may state that students will develop critical thinking but assign only multiple-choice recall questions. Conversely, an assessment may demand extended problem solving even though students were not given opportunities to practice that process. Kemendikbudristek (2022) encourages the use of assessment as part of learning, including diagnostic and formative information that helps teachers adjust instruction. Learning objectives make such adjustment possible because feedback can be interpreted in relation to intended progress.

The literature on inquiry and active learning also shows why alignment matters. (Muhamad Dah et al., 2024) report that open inquiry can support learning, but outcomes depend on task design, scaffolding, and

learners' readiness. (Wijnia et al., 2024) find that problem-, project-, and case-based learning can support motivation, yet effects vary across contexts. These studies imply that an objective must guide the level of openness, the type of support, and the form of evidence. A student-centered activity without a clear learning target can produce engagement without disciplinary progress.

Context, development, and the limits of narrow objectives

A fourth theme concerns what objectives cannot safely ignore. Instructional planning occurs in a social and developmental context. Students differ in prior knowledge, language, experience, motivation, and access to resources. Objectives should communicate common expectations while allowing teachers to differentiate the pathways through which students approach them. A rigid objective can become exclusionary when it confuses the learning goal with a single method of participation.

For example, if the essential objective is to explain the relationship between cause and consequence in a social event, students might demonstrate this through writing, oral presentation, a concept map, or a supported visual sequence depending on age and instructional purpose. The goal remains intellectually stable while access to the goal can vary. This is particularly important in elementary education, where development is rapid and uneven. Children may possess an idea they cannot yet express through extended academic writing. Planning therefore requires attention to what evidence is valid for the competence being taught.

The Merdeka Curriculum's emphasis on flexibility and learner needs reinforces this perspective. The national regulatory context established in 2024 positions the curriculum around learning achievements and gives teachers space to organize instruction according to context (Kemendikbudristek, 2024). The review suggests that this flexibility should not be interpreted as freedom from objectives. Instead, it increases the need for teachers to understand the objective well enough to vary instruction without losing the intended learning.

A second limit concerns the overuse of behavioral precision. The original literature on instructional objectives was valuable in challenging vague statements, but educational goals include dispositions and values that develop through repeated experience rather than one observable event. An elementary objective concerning cooperation, responsibility, or respect should not be treated as conclusively achieved because a child performs a behavior once. Such objectives require longitudinal observation and opportunities for reflection. Thus, objective formulation must be paired with a realistic theory of how learning develops.

Learning objectives in digital and AI-supported planning

The fifth theme is the growing importance of objectives as filters for technology. Walter (2024) found that language-generating AI could help a teacher produce and reorganize lesson materials, but the teacher remained responsible for defining context, judging recommendations, and aligning outputs with educational goals. This finding is consistent with the broader argument of the review: planning quality is not generated by the tool. It depends on a teacher's capacity to specify and interpret the intended learning.

Digital planning tools can make alignment more visible. (Børte & Lillejord, 2024) show how a learning-design tool can support teachers in connecting pedagogical reasoning and technology choices. Such tools may encourage teachers to move between objectives, activities, and resources rather than treating these as disconnected fields in a template. At the same time, the automation of planning creates a risk that objectives become generic. If a system repeatedly proposes statements such as "students will understand" or "students will know," teachers must still translate these into meaningful evidence and disciplinary performance.

(Balalle, 2024) systematic review of student engagement in technology-based education provides another caution. Technology can support engagement, but engagement is multidimensional and cannot be inferred from mere platform use. If an objective is academic, teachers need evidence of academic processing, not only clicks, completion, or visible enthusiasm. Learning objectives therefore protect planning from a technology-first logic by asking what student learning the tool is expected to enable.

The same principle applies to emerging AI-supported personalization. A digital system may generate differentiated tasks, but differentiation is valuable only when the tasks remain directed toward a coherent learning goal. The objective becomes the stable reference point across varied learning pathways. In this sense, the more flexible and technology-rich a classroom becomes, the more important clear learning objectives may be.

Discussion

Objectives should function as design logic, not administrative text

The synthesis indicates that the main weakness in the conventional treatment of learning objectives is not poor wording alone but poor use. An elegantly written objective has little value if it does not influence instruction. When objectives are completed because a template requires them, they become administrative text. When they guide the selection of content, activities, scaffolds, resources, questions, and assessments, they function as design logic.

This distinction helps explain why teachers sometimes experience planning as bureaucratic. If each component of a lesson plan is treated as an independent field, planning becomes a documentation exercise. Constructive alignment offers a more economical principle: each element should answer to the same intended learning (Biggs & Tang, 2011). A coherent plan can therefore be pedagogically sophisticated without being excessively long. What matters is the quality of the relationships among components.

The findings from recent Indonesian lesson-plan research strengthen this argument. Rahardjo (2024) demonstrates that evaluating lesson plans requires attention to alignment, not only compliance with required components. The Merdeka Curriculum similarly gives teachers more flexibility than highly prescriptive planning formats, but flexibility requires stronger professional judgment. Teachers must understand the learning destination well enough to design different routes toward it.

Precision must be balanced with meaningful and holistic learning

A second implication concerns the tension between specificity and reductionism. (Mager, 1997) emphasis on observable performance remains valuable because objectives such as "understand" can conceal uncertainty. However, not every educational purpose should be reduced to a single, immediately measurable behavior. The challenge is to make complex learning visible without stripping away its complexity.

This can be addressed through performance-based evidence. Higher-order objectives can be expressed through argument, explanation, investigation, design, comparison, creation, or reflection. Social and affective outcomes can be observed across situations and supported by self-assessment, peer interaction, teacher observation, and portfolios. The objective becomes assessable through a pattern of evidence rather than one discrete item. This approach is compatible with the revised taxonomy, which treats learning as active cognitive processing (Anderson & Krathwohl, 2001).

The balance is especially important at elementary level. A child who is developing literacy, self-regulation, and social participation may need integrated learning experiences rather than fragmented objectives. Teachers can still articulate specific outcomes, but those outcomes should sit within a broader developmental picture. For instance, a reading lesson can simultaneously support decoding, comprehension, oral language, and confidence, while the teacher chooses one or two outcomes as the principal assessment focus.

Implications for elementary teachers and the Merdeka Curriculum

The review suggests four practical questions that can strengthen planning. First, what is the most important learning students should carry forward from the lesson or unit? Second, what would count as convincing evidence of that learning? Third, what activity would require students to produce that evidence rather than merely encounter information? Fourth, what support or differentiation is needed so that students can meaningfully participate? These questions operationalize backward design and constructive alignment without requiring complex terminology.

Within the Merdeka Curriculum, such questions can help teachers translate learning achievements into classroom objectives. The curriculum's flexibility is most productive when objectives are neither copied verbatim from policy documents nor invented independently of them. Teachers need to interpret the intended competence, identify the developmental step appropriate for their students, and formulate evidence that is observable in the local learning context.

Technology can support this work, but professional judgment remains central. (Walter, 2024) shows that AI-assisted planning depends on teachers' ability to refine and reject suggestions. (Rahardjo, 2024) similarly demonstrate that new tools should be incorporated through alignment rather than novelty. Teachers should therefore evaluate AI-generated objectives by asking whether the language corresponds with the curriculum, whether the cognitive demand is realistic, and whether the planned assessment would actually demonstrate the stated outcome.

Professional development can use objective-writing as an entry point into deeper pedagogical reasoning. Rather than training teachers to substitute verbs in a formula, workshops can ask them to diagnose alignment. Teachers can compare an objective with an activity and assessment, identify mismatches, and redesign the sequence. Such work develops curriculum literacy because it requires interpreting what disciplinary competence looks like in practice.

Learning objectives as a basis for feedback and adaptation

Another implication is that objectives organize formative assessment. Feedback is useful when learners understand the direction of improvement. If the objective is clear, teachers can identify which component of performance requires support. A student may understand a concept but lack evidence, or may identify evidence but fail to explain its relationship to a claim. Objectives can therefore be decomposed analytically during feedback without being fragmented during instruction.

This function becomes particularly important in differentiated classrooms. Students may begin from different points and require different forms of support, but teachers need a common reference for judging progress. The objective provides that reference. Differentiation without a shared learning intention risks becoming different activities with incomparable expectations; objectives allow flexibility while preserving educational equity.

Limitations and research agenda

This article is a structured narrative review rather than a systematic evidence synthesis. The selected literature was purposefully assembled to clarify concepts and connect foundational and contemporary work; it does not represent every publication on learning objectives or instructional planning. The review also spans different educational levels and subject areas. The transfer of findings from higher education or STEM design to elementary education is therefore conceptual rather than direct.

Future research should examine how teachers actually use objectives while planning rather than only analyzing completed lesson-plan documents. Think-aloud studies, design conversations, and longitudinal observation could reveal whether teachers begin with objectives, how they negotiate curriculum demands, and when they modify objectives in response to students. Research in Indonesian schools could also examine whether greater flexibility under the Merdeka Curriculum produces stronger alignment or simply shorter documentation. Finally, AI-supported planning requires study of how teachers evaluate machine-generated objectives and whether such tools strengthen or weaken curricular coherence.

The central theoretical proposition arising from this review is that the quality of a learning objective cannot be judged by wording alone. Its quality is relational. A useful objective connects curriculum intention with student activity, evidence, feedback, and future learning. This relational view shifts attention from writing objectives to using them.

Conclusion

Learning objectives are a central component of instructional planning because they translate curriculum intentions into teachable and assessable expectations. The literature reviewed in this article shows that objectives are most useful when they guide the selection of learning activities, clarify evidence of achievement, support formative feedback, and maintain alignment among curriculum, pedagogy, and assessment. Their value therefore extends beyond administrative compliance or the use of observable verbs.

For elementary education, objectives must combine clarity with developmental sensitivity. They should identify meaningful learning without reducing complex cognitive, social, or affective development to isolated behaviors. Contemporary curriculum flexibility and digital planning tools make this balance even more important. Technology can help teachers generate resources and organize plans, but it cannot determine what learning should matter or whether an activity genuinely represents the intended outcome.

The practical implication is straightforward: teachers should treat learning objectives as the organizing logic of a lesson rather than the first box in a planning template. A strong objective creates coherence by connecting what students are expected to learn, what they are asked to do, how learning will be observed, and how teaching will respond to evidence. When used in this way, learning objectives become a professional reasoning tool for designing meaningful instruction.

Declarations

Author contribution

Author 1: developed the main research idea and objectives, designed the research methodology, conducted data collection and investigation, performed the data analysis, and prepared the first draft of the manuscript. Author 2: contributed to the development and implementation of the research methodology, supported the data collection and investigation process, and reviewed and revised the manuscript to improve its academic quality, clarity, and structure, provided input into the research concept and direction, supervised and guided the overall research process, reviewed and improved the manuscript, and contributed to obtaining financial support or research funding

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Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest related to the publication of this article.

Use of generative AI

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