

# THE IMPLICATIONS OF SYMBOLS IN EDUCATIONAL PLANNING

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2009-2010 PRESIDENTIAL ADDRESS

## ABSTRACT

*Educational planning phenomena, processes, and functions can be more vividly illustrated by the use of appropriate symbols and their interactions. The creation of new configurations by using symbols further inspires one's ideas in educational planning. This paper focuses on the interpretation and implication of symbols used in educational planning.*

## INTRODUCTION

Tanner (1980) in his presidential address to the International Society of Educational Planning identified change as a significant outcome of educational planning. Since then, scholars have tried to explore the horizon of educational planning to draw a possible boundary to the field. This can be seen in the variety of topics addressed in *Educational Planning* in the last three decades (Lindahl and Beach, 2010). Embedded among the areas identified as educational planning, are many symbols as representations of educational planning. These symbols sometimes exist individually to indicate certain planning functions. They also appear as combinations or interactions to stand for complex planning phenomena or processes. These symbols help draw graphic pictures depicting an international language of understanding. This paper attempts to highlight some of these often used planning symbols to assist in understanding their specific representations through which more intelligent and sensible planning functions can be derived.

## THE SYMBOLS OF EDUCATIONAL PLANNING

### *The Heart*

The heart of educational planning relates to the attitudes, consciences and professional ethics of educational planners. Fullan (2001) simply described it as a moral purpose with the intention of making a positive difference in the lives of employees, customers, and society as a whole. The ethics of educational planning was addressed by Tanner (1980) as disaggregating disparities and determining the factors that caused the disparities. When planning decisions are made, many alternative values emerge for planners' consideration. Referencing the planning process, Heywood (1974) stated that "the whole complex mechanism of the modern city, with all its diverse and sophisticated activities, should be no more than a device to enable its residents to fulfill as many of their values as fully as possible" (p.67). He identified three principles for planners in decision-making:

1. The people most directly affected by a decision should be those whose interests are given greatest weight.
2. Life-preserving and sustaining objectives, concerned with shelter, sustenance, and safety should take preference over life-enhancing ones of movement, personal fulfillment, and profit.
3. Positive discrimination should be practiced in the allocation of public resources, and in the preparation of public policies in favor of the least affluent and least competitive groups, who would otherwise be pushed into increasingly deprived conditions of life. (p. 66)

The heart of educational planning has not been given enough weight in the past years as evidenced by Lindahl and Beach (2010) in their special tribute to the 40<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the International Society for Educational Planning (ISEP). They clearly pointed out that "considering the importance, remarkably little attention was given to the human aspects of these processes" (p. 4).

### *The Diamond*

The diamond of educational planning refers to the quality of educational planning in terms of

content and delivery techniques. The diamond sparkles with the finer qualities of educational planning. As identified by Tanner (1980), the weakness of educational planning has been to emphasize how many people flew through the various levels of education while undermining the kinds of learning experiences to which they were exposed. As important as *which* educational programs are planned is *how* educational programs are planned. The appropriate use of planning techniques leads to the validity and reliability of data collected for planning use. The quality of educational planning can be improved by performing needs assessments to understand the nature of the problem and how the problem can be addressed by educational planning. Quality control of educational planning can be enhanced by conducting both formative and summative evaluations. Results of evaluation can be used as guidelines to improve the diamond quality of educational plans.

### *The Ladder*

The ladder symbolizes the steps to be followed in developing and implementing educational plans. While situations differ, planning procedures follow more or less the same basic principles. Lewis (1983) developed the strategic planning process of a school district as follows:

1. Conducting a critical analysis of the school district.
2. Establishing the guidance system for strategic planning.
3. Setting long-range goals.
4. Selecting program strategies.
5. Developing operational plans.
6. Preparing short-range objectives.
7. Establishing performance standards.
8. Establishing an action plan.
9. Reporting operational performance results.
10. Evaluating planning effectiveness.

These procedures are planned and conducted in such a way that one needs to stay securely in one step before attempting another with administrators always looking up to the program goal to avoid deviation from the track. Through this symbol, one step up means one step closer toward achieving the program goal.

### *The Star*

The star that shines signifies the successful development and implementation of an educational plan. It is a display of high level wisdom and the skills of a group of planning professionals who are determined to create their plans as models for others. The success of an educational plan relies a great deal on the balance of the four planning components (time, place, people and resources) and the eight planning functions (changing, charging, directing, dramatizing, preparing, projecting, reviewing and risking) as discussed later in this paper. A rising star is a well developed educational plan that has experienced initial success. A falling star is an outdated educational plan that needs major revision and realignment to stand the test of time.

### *The Inverted Triangle*

The inverted triangle is an excellent way to demonstrate the scope of coverage in educational planning at different levels. Since educational planning could start from the national level all the way down to the classroom level, the effect size of educational planning varies from level to level. This is where macro planners come in to take a panoramic view of the entire landscape and draw a big picture of the anticipated future. On the other hand, micro planning takes into consideration fine details of the scope of work to ensure that it aligns with the goals and objectives of the macro plan. The macro plan at a higher level establishes planning guidelines to be followed by micro planners who focus on fine-tuning of essential elements for plan implementation. Obviously, macro planning at the top level covers a larger territory with greater impact on the people it serves.

### *The Equilateral Triangle*

The equilateral triangle has been used as a planning concept to convey the idea of relative overall effects as a result of change in one side, or aspect of the plan. The characteristics of an equilateral triangle help explain the phenomenon that the lengths of all sides as well as the total area of the triangle change as the length of one side changes. Thompson and Wood (2001) illustrated well the effect of budget constraint on educational programs by using the equilateral triangle with revenue, expenditure and program as the three sides. They claimed that “the definition of a budget is first based on quality programs and well supported by revenue and expenditure plans that make envisioned outcomes possible” (p. 142). Budgeting is undoubtedly an essential element in educational planning.

### *The Cycle*

The cycle starts at a designated point and moves forward with a sequence of steps. The tour of the cycle eventually comes back to the starting point. It is best used in planning situations where a process is followed step by step and ends in an outcome to feedback to the initial planning effort. A classic example of this cycle effect can be seen in Tyler’s curriculum planning model (Hewitt, 2006) which begins with goal setting as Step One followed by objective development as Step Two. Step Three includes activities and procedures to implement the curriculum to achieve the goal. An evaluation component of the curriculum planning process as Step Four leads back to Step One. An essential function of the cycle model is feedback after evaluation. Planners can then review the evaluation feedback to consider alignment with the original goal. Another example of the use of a planning cycle is shown in Chan’s educational facility planning model (Chan, 1999) which identified six planning phases (preparing, programming, designing, bidding and contracting, constructing and warranting). Feedback during the warranty phase is provided to the facility planners for design improvement in the next planning cycle.

### *The Square*

The square symbolized by the four equal sides indicates the four major components of educational planning: time, place, people and resources. These components are equally important in the successful implementation of educational plans. Some of these planning components were illustrated by Polka (2007) as a vast array of real and potential intervening variables (people, things, and ideas) that may impact on the implementation of change.

### *Time*

Planning is involved in the study of the past and understanding of the present. The major task of educational planning is based on past and present experiences to develop strategies to address anticipated future happenings.

### *Place*

The place component of educational planning not only relates to the physical planning location but also refers to the professional climate that prevails in the educational setting. In addition, the cultural environment also has significant impact on the way educational plans are developed.

### *People*

The people of educational planning refer to the people who serve (planners) and the people to be served (students). Different elements of these two groups will determine the different directions and steps in developing educational plans. Educational planners need to exercise a high standard of professionalism to address the educational needs of students.

### *Resources*

Resources in educational planning refer to the expertise, the financial support, and the hardware and software availability in the planning processes. Resources provide the basis of success in educational planning.

### *The One-Way Arrow*

The one-way arrow denotes action or movement pointing toward one direction of educational planning. One-way arrows are usually used as ways to show directionality toward the goals to be achieved. Most of the one-way arrows are either pointing horizontally or vertically. These one-way arrows can be classified into three types: (1) Setting goals and timelines to bring poor performance to an acceptable level; (2) Setting goals and timelines for sustainability of satisfactory performance; and (3) Setting goals and timelines to challenge current acceptable performance to a higher level of excellence (Jiang and Chan, 1990). One-way arrows are often used in school improvement plans and their evaluation reports to indicate the benchmarks and the outcomes of planning efforts.

### *Two-Way Arrows (Vertical and Horizontal)*

Two-way arrows in educational planning indicate an action and reaction model of communication between two or more stakeholders in the planning process. It is a participatory approach to achieve a shared purpose. Two-way arrows express two modes of communication: vertical and horizontal.

Vertical two-way arrows symbolize directional movements in educational planning. The arrow going downward can be interpreted as instructions from a centralized authority while the arrow moving upward can be seen as recommendations to a governing body from subordinates as a result of decentralization efforts. In plain language, Scott (2009) simply described the approach of “top-down” as mandates and “bottom-up” as reflections of assessed local needs.

Horizontal two-way arrows are demonstrations of communication within the same level. They express a clear collaborative effort in getting special interest parties involved to achieve a common goal. Recent examples of these horizontal directions are shown in the development of professional learning communities for continuous improvement to enhance student achievement (DuFour, DuFour & Eaker, 2008).

### *The Octagon*

The octagon symbolizes the eight major functions of educational planning. The eight functions are summarized as the two Cs (Changing and Charging), the two Ds (Directing and Dramatizing), the two Ps (Preparing and Projecting), and two Rs (Reviewing and Risking). For sure, educational planning means that *change* is needed – change for improvement (Polka, 2007). The *charge* of educational planning is to move forward for a better future. Educational planning is conducted with reference to future scenarios as a result of *projection* and *dramatization*. In *preparation* for educational plans, *directions* are formulated by *reviewing* present situations and past experiences. Working on many assumptions and unknown features, educational planners try their very best to come up with the most efficient and effective plan to achieve goals. Yet, it is inevitable that certain *risks* are involved in the process of educational planning. Furthermore, no matter how well a plan is developed, during the course of implementation, the plan may be impacted by a combination and interaction of these eight planning functions.

## IMPLICATIONS FOR EDUCATIONAL PLANNING

Symbols provide meaningful graphic designs for the interpretation of educational planning phenomena. Their special shapes serve as a common language with which to communicate that span across culture and language, supporting multicultural planning purposes. In reviewing the symbols discussed in this paper, the following educational conceptualizations can be summarized:

### *The Domino Effect of Educational Planning*

Many components in educational planning are interdependent and rely upon one another for existence. When one component fails, it impacts other related components. As a result, all the components fail, one after another. The seriousness of the domino effect in educational planning can be seen in the revenue, program, and student achievement example cited earlier. As revenue, educational program, and student achievement are so interrelated, the success or failure of any part of that three-part structure will cause the entire planning structure to change.

### *The Levels and Scopes of Educational Planning*

Educational planning was once thought of as only an administrative function to be performed at the policy making level. But, educators soon realized that educational planning involves stakeholders at all levels. It is a task with a scope that stretches both vertically and horizontally. It can start as a micro class planning activity to a macro national policy setting. Educational planning includes all aspects of education: academic disciplines, school and system operations, and the panoramic view of strategic planning encompassing the very purposes of education.

### *Planning Effectiveness and Planning Experiences*

The process of educational planning is not linear by nature. It actually follows an arc, the extension of which is the formation of a cycle. When more cycles of planning are performed, the cumulative experiences are fed back into the process for more effective planning in the upcoming cycles. In this fashion, the quality of educational planning can improve over time.

### *Projection Accuracy and Planning Success*

The effort of projection is to construct a scenario of the future upon which educational planning targets are focused. The closer the scenarios are drawn to reflect reality, the greater are the chances educational plans will be successful. Many educational plans have failed because either the dataset used for projection was wrong or the projection methodology was inappropriate.

### *Alternative Planning For Education*

Successful planning depends on a high degree of projection accuracy. Often, specific educational plans are so critical they cannot afford to fail. Therefore, careful educational planners always generate alternative plans to address contingency situations. Alternative plans are like safety nets to diminish the likelihood that planning efforts will get off track.

### *Chances to Engage Risks and Opportunities*

Changes in educational systems offer chances for improvement and innovative attempts. Yet, while educational planners are searching for opportunities of positive changes, they also encounter possible risks. Many successful educational planners neutralize risks with their planning confidence and excellence.

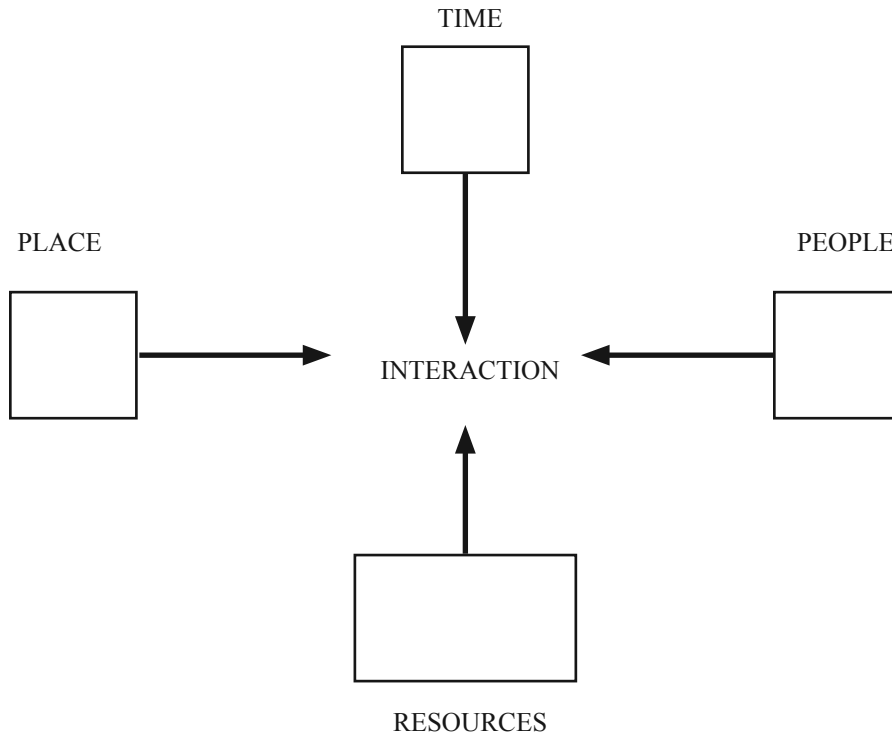
### *Planning as a Collaborative Process*

As seen in the many symbols and configurations, the planning process is complicated. Many components are involved and many factors are considered in carefully monitoring the planning progress in education to ensure successful planning and implementation. As the African proverb notes, "It takes a village to raise a child." Meaningful educational planning is surely a collaborative process. As Krug (1957) noted, planning must be undertaken by large groups of stakeholders working in cooperative settings to develop implementation projects.

### *The Right Combination and Interaction*

The best educational planning outcome is the result of a combination and interaction of the right time, the right place, the right people and the right resources (see Figure 1). The challenge for educational planners is to launch educational plans in the right direction, to the right extent, and at the right moment. Educational plans (and planners) have to maintain a certain flexibility to adapt to unexpected changes of time, place, people and resources to proceed.

Figure 1. The Interaction of Planning Symbols



### CONCLUSION

Educational planning is an art and a skill. It is a combination of many elements and situational factors. It particularly involves human resources as the essential motivational framework. Many symbols seem to be able to reflect the essence of educational planning, especially the planning intent, direction, process, components, and features. I would like to conclude this paper by introducing Taoism, a Chinese philosophy symbolized by the Tai Ji (the extremes) Circle (see Figure 2) within which two areas Yin (shade) and Yang (brightness) are divided (Hutchinson Encyclopedia, 2010). It was designed in such a way that one area starts small and continues to develop to its maximum potential. It will then begin to wane and merge into the small starting point of the other area. Each area contains an element or seed of the other, and they cannot exist without each other. The concept of Yin and Yang describes two opposing and, at the same time, complementary aspects of any one phenomenon or comparison of any two phenomena. The two areas represent the two extremes of educational planning. As the two areas continue to move so does the planning cycle. There are always new cycles to start and new areas to grow. For years, educational planners have tried to explore and define the parameters of the field of educational planning. New ground has been identified and developed. Through the configuration of different combinations of symbols, educational planners may be stimulated to discover and explore new territory and expand our understanding of educational planning. Educational planning is a fertile and active field. Many new lands of educational planning are waiting to be found and cultivated.

Figure 2. The Tai Ji Symbol showing the two areas of Yin and Yang.



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