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**EDUCATIONAL PLANNING IN LATIN AMERICA:  
A NEW PARADIGM?**

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## PREFACE

Carlos M. Alvarez is associate professor and director of the Graduate Program in International Development Education at the College of Education, Florida International University. He gratefully acknowledges the valuable comments made by Robert V. Farrell, also of the College of Education, on a preliminary version of this paper.

The quotations that appear in this paper are the author's translations from the Spanish.

Richard Tardanico

Editor

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## EDUCATIONAL PLANNING IN LATIN AMERICA: A NEW PARADIGM?

As in other regions of the world, the field of educational planning has been the target of serious criticism in Latin America, particularly regarding the efficacy and relevance of its procedures. Recently, however, the focus of questioning has shifted from methodology to epistemology. As Laura E. Irurzun (1983) indicates, the planners have tended to act within the classic scientific paradigm without delving into epistemological and axiological suppositions and into the consequences of problem solving. She points out that the crises of a continent undergoing rapid structural transformations have prompted Latin American educational planners to go beyond purely methodological issues.

The first purpose of this article is to review new criticisms of, and perspectives on, educational planning as they have emerged in Latin America in the last few years. This review places special emphasis on identifying those elements which appear to be transforming the epistemological bases of educational planning. It argues that the epistemological changes taking place in the field are signaling the appearance of a new way of thinking about the planning process or, in Kuhn's (1970) terms, a change in its scientific paradigm.

The article's second purpose is to initiate discussion of the possible impact of the new premises on views of education, on the nature and objectives of educational planning, and on the role of the educational planner.

## RECENT CRITICISMS

A review of recent criticisms of the educational planning process in Latin America suggests that the field is undergoing a significant conceptual evolution. If a distinction is made between the theoretical and methodological aspects of planning, it is possible to conclude that most of those criticisms fall within the realm of theory, even though they may have profound methodological implications. In other words, the criticisms have been directed toward the conceptual premises underlying previous educational planning practices.

Most recent critiques have primarily focused on the theoretical foundations of what has been traditionally identified as process of "normative planning." Normative planning has been characterized by the programming of procedures aimed at achieving unquestioned norms and objectives. The newly emerging perspectives can be seen as attempts to create alternative approaches to those associated with normative planning.

McGinn (1980, p. 342) describes normative planning as "rational deterministic, closed-ended, mechanistic, preactive." He writes that a major characteristic of this type of planning is "the use of models to understand what actions should be taken, given forecasts of what is likely to happen." A similar criticism is raised by Escotet (1982) who labels as "realist strategies" those procedures traditionally associated with normative planning. He criticizes such strategies because they represent the "anticlimax" of planning. Escotet argues that educational planning based upon a realist strategy is oriented more toward identifying goals than creating them; toward maintaining a reality rather than changing it; and toward pairing needs with resources, as opposed to pairing expectations with resources. In

sum, these critics argue that normative planning has become a simple exercise in prediction and in programming resources toward "natural" goals of development largely based upon a linear-mechanistic concept of the educational process.

McGinn and Porter (1984) discuss examples of failure in the educational planning experiences for marginal communities in developing countries. They attribute these failures to the assumptions held by the planners. That is, the educational planners based their plans upon assumptions which are characteristic of normative planning: that problems have general solutions, that solutions can be known beforehand, and that the planner's problem is to locate the solutions and make them happen. McGinn and Porter argue that normative planning would have made sense in these cases if these assumptions had been true.

In a comprehensive review, Moncada (1982) associates the shortcomings and failures of educational planning in Latin America with prevailing unrealistic assumptions about the relationship between education and societal goals. In his analysis of the education-employment issue, Moncada criticizes widespread assumptions about the impact of education (primarily defined in terms of scholarization objectives) on the job market. He asserts that such assumptions do not take into account the role that socioeconomic and political factors play in the attainment of educational planning goals. Most critics of normative planning express, either implicitly or explicitly, their disagreement with a view of educational planning that isolates it from its socioeconomic and political context. They frequently argue that, in normative planning, political factors are taken as accidental and are seen as not being of legitimate concern to those responsible for the planning of

educational objectives. As Matus (1980) points out in reference to normative planning in the field of economics, the political viability of the plan is assumed to be predetermined and not to be something to be constructed.

### EMERGING PERSPECTIVES

Some of the most outstanding Latin American planning perspectives of the last few years can be classified according to the degree to which they emphasize different theoretical assumptions. The categories presented below are not intended to represent discrete entities. They merely represent an arbitrary categorization of recent Latin American perspectives according to the emphasis they place on different theoretical premises.

#### Emphasis on the Systemic Nature of Planning

Among the most prominent new perspectives advocating alternatives to educational planning are those that appear to reflect the post-cybernetics developments of science. Irurzun (1983), for example, emphasizes the need to question assumptions based upon the old scientific paradigm characterized by reductionistic and logical-analytic interpretations of the world. This paradigm is perhaps successful in the interpretations of physical phenomena, but it is insufficient in its explanation of the complexities of human reality. Irurzun argues that, in order to respond more successfully to present societal needs, educational planners must change their perceptions of reality to accommodate a new view that is more consistent with the evolution taking place in science. She identifies the new perception of reality to be required of educational planners with what she calls the

"systemic paradigm" that has emerged out of the still highly evolving field of "General Systems Theory." According to Irurzun (1983, pp. 10-11), the methodologies that originate from these foundations (systemic paradigms) move in the direction of holistic thinking as ontology, toward the abolition of the traditional disciplines' boundaries. She claims that the holistic perspective, which is implicit in a General Systems Theory approach, will permit a view of education in terms of its interrelations with other contextual subsystems. Such a view will facilitate the design of plans toward the more successful transformation of the subsystem of education and the societal system as a whole.

Another educational planner adopting General Systems Theory as a frame of reference, Barcaglioni (1983), explicitly states the need for a new planning methodology with a systemic-global focus. In his view, the most important objective of such a methodology is that of "orienting both through process and action to achieve a totalizing and coherent model for the vast educational field" (p. 5). He proposes a planning model, based on General Systems Theory, which would permit the development of a methodology to overcome multidisciplinary focuses and facilitate those of a transdisciplinary nature.

In an attempt to conceptually integrate recent scientific developments in the fields of General Systems Theory, Information Theory, and Cybernetics with those taking place in Ecology and Environmental Sciences, Olivares (1983) introduces the "ecosystemic" perspective. He stresses the importance of approaching educational plans with a holistic view based upon integrated scientific foundations. Olivares argues that such an integrated scientific frame of reference can be derived from recent ecological theories that look at the phenomenon of life "holistically," within the complexity of all of



the biologically and culturally based factors which influence it. He proposes that the educational planners take the "human ecosystem" as the primary unit of analysis in their educational praxis. In other words, Olivares argues that "as a synthesis, the ecosystemic perspective proposes to analyze the educational phenomenon based upon the foundations of the human ecosystem, and to approach its understanding, planning and praxis in transdisciplinary terms, with an integrated (holistic) view, at least in terms of biopsyo-sociocultural reality" (p. 6).

In general, recent Latin American approaches appear to share an important assumption--the need for a systemic or holistic view of educational planning. That is, the process is not conceived as an entity isolated from its social context. In a systemic view of planning, aspects such as political decisions are considered neither as external to the process nor as variables that arbitrarily interfere with the execution of plans designed with a linear framework of development.

#### Emphasis on the Teleological Aspect of Educational Planning

Another assumption of recent Latin American educational planning perspectives is that of the need to focus attention on the teleological elements that serve as an incentive or creative impulse to the planning process. One of the perspectives which emphasizes the importance of this element has been advanced by Escotet (1982), who proposes "utopian planning" as an alternative to modern planning. Escotet writes that modern planning is "devoid of creative imagination" and it is primarily characterized by its "programming" nature. He observes that, in most cases of normative planning, the objectives established during the process do not differ from those that are intrinsic to the natural cumulative growth experiences by the

variables being planned. Normative planners, in general, depart from present reality and design or organize strategies to achieve foreseeable futures that may be simply explained in terms of linearly characterized developmental processes. Escotet argues that this factor may, at least partially, explain the methodological emphasis by normative planners on prediction and regression models.

In contrast, Escotet proposes that planning methodology departs from its current teleological component by using a utopian goal to arrive at the present reality: "The society's course is oriented towards attaining utopia and, even when not attained, the direction remains the established, desirable one" (1982, p. 75). The teleological element, in this case defined as a utopian goal, infuses the process with dynamism since, as Escotet suggests, utopian planning becomes a permanent attitude. This is so because, when attained or nearly attained, the utopia is refined according to newly emerging realities.

Garzon (1983), presenting a similar teleological approach, points out the need for a "prospective" approach to educational planning. In his view, a prospective approach consists of the configuration of a model for a future society, departing from the anticipation of a set of characteristics that are perceived as desirable and that have been discussed by those who will be affected by them. This approach implies multiple outcomes or a wide range of possible "futures" derived from variations of the broadly articulated "desired future." From this perspective, the goal is conceived as an open matrix of possibilities that will be multi-determined by a series of actions to be planned in order to reach the desired future. Garzon criticizes so-called normative or realistic planning. He asserts that it designs its plan of action to attain objectives that have been programmed according

to projections based on a natural outgrowth of reality, and not according to a desirable future outcome for society.

Other recent perspectives on educational planning (McGinn and Porter, 1983, 1984; Riquelme, 1982) also assume the need to emphasize the teleological element in the planning process.

#### Emphasis on the View of Educational Planning as a Process

Another offshoot of recent approaches is the idea of educational planning as a "process" rather than as an action or series of actions capable of being isolated from their context, whose effects can be statistically evaluated. Thinking of planning as a process implies that it be perceived in terms of linked interactions rather than as a series of actions. A process view focuses attention on the interactions, often contradictory or conflictive, instead of on static units related by consensus.

In this respect, the approaches of Escotet (1982) and McGinn and Porter (1983, 1984) are noteworthy because of their process view. According to Escotet, although in utopian planning the ultimate goal is the utopia and this goal is elaborated to guide the direction of actions, such direction is not conceived of as a cumulative set of discrete acts which lead toward a definite and foreseeable objective. On the contrary, although the utopia represents the guiding light which implies the parameters of a trajectory, this trajectory is extensive in that within it are many possible paths. These paths, or alternatives, are defined according to the planner's analysis of the contextual situations (1982, pp. 74-75). Escotet does not speak of a sole plan of cumulative actions, but rather of the necessity of looking for contextual alternatives within an extensive but definite trajectory. Thus Escotet represents a view of planning whose primordial characteristics

are those of processes and interactions, not of discrete events within a linear trajectory.

McGinn and Porter's (1983, 1984) strategic-participatory planning perspective also contradicts the normative model by regarding planning as a process. They differentiate these two approaches in the following manner:

...because their conception is different, they are formulated differently. The normative plan is generally stated in a document/book, product of an investigation that required processed and systematized information, which is slow and complex to produce...the strategic plan, in practice, abides more by the idea of a process, of something continuously in force. It is not formulated in public writing, but rather in the existence of periodical mechanisms of discussion and analysis. For this purpose, foreseen support is necessary, with constant information, analysis and both technical and political assessments (1983, p. 301).

McGinn and Porter propose that a strategic-participatory view of planning should suppose "the existence of conflicting goals" and recognize

the social forces pulling in different directions (heterogeneity), assigning these opponent forces capacity of initiative in the co-production of the plan, accepting the possibility that these social forces manage to formulate their own totalizing plan and not just reactions to the normative plan (1983, p. 31).

They claim that the normative models traditionally have operated on premises of compatibility and consistency, while ignoring the conflict or resistance among social forces surrounding the educational plan.

McGinn and Porter's strategic-participatory model introduces the methodological basis for planning as a process. They argue that educational planners should overcome the severe dichotomy between the diagnosis and the elaboration of the plan by developing a more dynamic conception of planning which conceives of reality "as totally capable of self-organization, self-regulation and self-planning" (1983, p. 31). It is within this dynamic framework that planning becomes a participatory process, since the planner is perceived as being part of the plan, inseparable from the social forces acting upon it.

In other words, McGinn and Porter's planning model establishes the basis for a methodology whose foundations are neither asituational nor based on a linear strategy; quite the contrary, such foundations are based on a relational view of the global reality. Their model regards this global reality as characterized by an interdependent but conflictive nature and by actions that result from the contradictory relations between the planner and his/her context.

#### A NEW VIEW OF EDUCATIONAL PLANNING

An overview of recent Latin American approaches to educational planning reaffirms our assertion that the field of educational planning in this region is undergoing a critical period of questioning and change.

The authors cited have criticized the assumptions underlying normative models of planning and have proposed alternatives that are based upon an entirely different set of premises. In other words, the emerging Latin American view of educational planning seems to reflect such a radical transformation of its premises that, arguably, a paradigmatic change is taking place.

This radical transformation involves fundamental changes in the type of reasoning applied to educational planning. Traditional assumptions reflect a compartmentalized-linear type of reasoning while the new premises reflect what can be described as systemic-dialectical reasoning. The new assumptions, and the type of reasoning they reflect, influence our general view of education, the nature of the planning process, and ultimately, the role attributed to the educational planner.

## BASIC CHARACTERISTICS OF THE NEW ASSUMPTIONS

This article argues that the new Latin American perspectives on educational planning reflect profound changes in the field's theoretical assumptions. At the core of the new assumptions is a different system of reasoning that synthesizes the systematic perspective, which is highly influenced by contemporary scientific developments in the fields of General Systems Theory, Cybernetics, and Information Theories; and dialectical logic, which has long influenced both Eastern and Western thought. The basic characteristics of the new assumptions are as follows:

- (1) The phenomenon being planned is thought of as a system formed by inter-related elements or subsystems that manifest their "open" nature by a continuous interaction with their environment (of which they are in turn also a subsystem).
- (2) Integral to open systems is the capacity of self-regulation; that is, the system's ability to react to imbalances, thereby providing itself with a level of homeostatic equilibrium.
- (3) Due to the fluidity of an open system's boundaries, it is constantly adapting to its environment through internal structural changes brought about by interrelated changes among its elements or subsystems. An important aspect of this systemic view is its conception of structure in terms of relationships.
- (4) Another important aspect of the systems is autonomy, which is manifested not only as self-regulation but also as self-control. All control of the system lies within its own boundaries; that is, any alteration--stabilizing or unstabilizing--comes from within. Thus, it is impossible to try to control or plan the system from the outside;

new interrelationships are immediately established with the subsystems, and the "planner" is immediately converted into a part of the system as just one more subsystem.

General Systems Theory has undoubtedly made significant contributions to contemporary science. However, its contributions have remained limited by its emphasis (perhaps somewhat disproportionate) on the description of the functioning of systems as opposed to the study of the principles that explain systemic transformations. When speaking of applying the systemic view to a process such as educational planning--whose primordial objective is not necessarily the description, but rather the change of educational realities--it is necessary to integrate with the systemic view a perspective that helps explain the nature of structural changes. This paper demonstrates that, in addition to presenting a systemic view, recent perspectives have begun to speak about the dialectical nature of the changes taking place among forces surrounding the educational planning process. In other words, dialectics, with its emphasis on understanding a constantly changing reality and with its focus on relational analyses, is beginning to be used as a conceptual tool to study and plan the structural transformation of educational systems.

But, how does dialectics contribute to the understanding and planning of educational systems? As indicated before, dialectics is a logic or system of thought that attempts to explain phenomena from the standpoint of process; from a dialectical perspective, the essence of reality is change, not stasis or permanence. The dialectical principles that are consistent with a systemic perspective and which are most relevant to educational planning can be summarized as follows:

- (1) Given that dialectics tries to explain the process of change, its focus of interest is on the existing interrelationships within a system. In this way it coincides with one of the basic principles of Systems Theory.
- (2) Dialectics is especially effective at explaining change in highly complex open systems because the character of these systems usually reflects a higher level of interrelation or interdependence among components. A linear analysis of the processes of change within these complex systems is very limited because with great probability, such processes are products of multiple and simultaneous determinants. In this way, dialectics coincides with one of the prominent characteristics of systems analysis.
- (3) According to dialectical reasoning, social systems have within themselves potential for transformation because of the essentially contradictory nature of the constituent elements. Each subsystem carries within itself the element of its own negation, and its interrelationship with other subsystems are characterized by this element of contradiction. Hence change, or more specifically, contradiction or the struggle of opposing forces, is the essence of transformation in the structures of an open or highly complex system. It may be deduced that the adaptability or functioning of the system depends upon its capacity both to promote such structural transformations and to compensate for internal contradictions by self-regulation. It is in providing the basis for understanding the system's structural transformations--in terms of contradictory interrelationships--that we find the primary contribution of dialectics to the systemic viewpoint. In many versions, General Systems Theory has emphasized the system's self-



regulatory or homeostatic character, but doing so presents only one facet and does not explain the precise nature of transformations.

In summary, the principles that integrate the systemic and the dialectical perspectives lie at the root of the new theoretical assumptions that characterize Latin American's new educational planning perspectives.

### IMPLICATIONS OF NEW ASSUMPTIONS

A set of new theoretical assumptions about educational planning, based upon an integration of systemic and dialectical perspectives, brings a series of implications to the field of Latin American educational planning. These implications can be outlined in terms of their impact upon views of: (1) the educational process; (2) the nature and objectives of educational planning; and (3) the role of the educational planner.

#### The Educational Process

Systemic-dialectical assumptions lead us to view education as an important subsystem of the global system; as such, education is interdependent with such other subsystems as the economy, politics, culture, and the like. Thus, change in one or several of the subsystems affects the rest of the subsystems within the global system. At the same time, profound change in one of the subsystems necessitates changing its interrelationship with other subsystems, or, put differently, profound change requires structural transformations at different levels of the global system. This idea reflects the totalizing and interrelational perception characteristic of the systemic viewpoint.

From a systemic point of view, then, education cannot be conceived in isolation from its context; plans for internal changes in the educational process interact with processes in the socioeconomic and political subsystems. Hence, changes in the subsystems of education may originate in other contextual subsystems. The opposite may also be true: internally initiated changes in the subsystem of education may influence other subsystems.

By adding the dialectical dimension to the systemic view of education, we begin to see the contradictions in the interdependence of the subsystem with other subsystems of the global system; that is, it becomes apparent that the interdependence of subsystems does not form a panorama of balanced and harmonious forces. A dialectical perspective requires evaluating not only transformations in the trajectory followed by changes in structural relationships, but also the impact of those changes on the direction plotted toward the system's ultimate goals.

### The Nature and Objectives of Educational Planning

Based upon systemic-dialectical assumptions, educational planning is a subsystem of the global planning system whose structural position is defined by its interrelationships (in many cases contradictory) with the other subsystems that make up the global system. Thus educational planning (as happens with all activities of a social nature) is in a constant state of change and exchange with its environment due to its interrelationship with the global system.

A systemic-dialectical view distances itself from the idea of educational planning as a concatenated series of actions that can be classified according to such actions as diagnosis, the establishment of norms or objectives, methodology, and implementation and evaluation, all of which can be

compiled into a document called a "plan." The systemic-dialectical view regards educational planning as a process in which both planning and educational-global realities interrelate dynamically.

As Matus (1973) asserts, planning should be conceptualized in terms of strategies, an approach that is more consistent with a "process" view of planning. This means that activities related to educational planning (e.g., diagnosis, definition of planning objectives, implementation and evaluation of procedures) are conceptualized situationally, given the dynamic nature of educational and global realities. It is important to clarify, however, that a strategic and situational perspective does not necessarily imply a short-term approach to planning. It is the teleological component of the process, defined in terms of a broadly articulated goal, which turns it into a long-term endeavor. Nevertheless, the goal must be broad enough to be redefined at every step of the process in terms of newly emerging contextual variables, yet precise enough to permit that its premises serve as a guide to the process of articulation of situational strategies.

We have seen in sum that recent perspectives based upon systemic-dialectical assumptions define educational planning not in terms of cumulative programming mechanisms or long-term linear predictions. Rather, such perspectives define educational planning as the activation of an interdependent process in which actions are decided situationally, according to premises that are consistent with the plan's ultimate goal. The teleological element acts as a frame of reference for developing situational strategies that dialectically produce new syntheses that draw near to the ultimate goal--a new qualitative order.

Educational planning based upon systemic-dialectical premises, while not discarding or questioning the validity of data collection and forecasting techniques used in normative planning, points us toward new methodologies that are more amenable to process-oriented interpretations of planned events. It may be possible, distinguishing between theory and method, that educational planners will have success in combining traditional methodologies with theoretical interpretations based upon a systemic-dialectical paradigm.

### The Role of the Educational Planner

Systemic-dialectical premises imply that the planner be seen less as a technician than as a strategist. A planner's skills should not be limited to the methodological aspects of planning, but should include abilities both to analyze reality in a totalizing manner and to act strategically according to such analysis. Thus the new planner's role as a strategist requires a perspective that transcends the fragmentation and isolation of variables so typical of the social sciences. Such a perspective would orient the planner's attention to the dynamics of the process or upon the interrelations among identified variables. As a strategist, the planner should be capable of a dynamic analysis of the power relations among forces both internal and external to the educational process. The educational planner should also be capable of guiding those forces toward the ultimate goal.

Of fundamental importance is the planner's capacity to develop a systemic-dialectical view that permits a holistic understanding of the educational-global reality and an understanding of the dialectical nature of structural changes. In turn, the planner must combine such understanding with the dexterity to direct the process in the desired direction. A

systemic-dialectical view will enable the planner to see himself/herself as a constituent element of both the educational process and the global planning process. Finally, this view will prevent the planner from thinking of himself/herself as a regulator or controller who is external to the process; it will foster participatory strategies of change based upon analysis of concrete interrelations.

### CONCLUSIONS

Some of the recent Latin American views on educational planning recently depart from the normative approaches that have dominated the field. Based on fundamental changes in epistemology, educational planners not only have heightened their awareness of the interrelationship between educational and global plans, but have come to regard planning more as a strategic process than as a technocratic exercise.

New perspectives on educational planning are presenting challenges to educational leaders. Foremost among those challenges is the need to provide educational planners with strategic abilities. Such abilities revolve around a perspective that views educational planning as a participatory process whose goals are defined by a continuous process of situational decision-making. This challenge opens up a series of questions concerning appropriate training for educational planners; the abilities needed by planners may fall in the domain of disciplines, such as social psychology and sociology, that focus on group dynamics and change. Meanwhile, it remains for us to identify other challenges to the field of educational planning.

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