A Study of the Relationship between Governance and School Effectiveness in Hong Kong

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Abstract - Hong Kong Government's amendment of the Education Ordinance requiring all schools to establish an incorporated management committee (IMC) to oversee school management brought a new governance structure. This study attempts to understand the patterns of governance in Hong Kong and their link to governance effectiveness and sustainable development. The mediating effect of board functioning and trust on this relation is also examined. Findings and their implications to theorists and practitioners will be discussed.

Keywords—school governance, board functioning, trust, governance effectiveness, sustainable development

I. Introduction

In the past 14 years, Hong Kong has introduced a comprehensive package of education reforms designed to improve quality and access of the education system. A key component of the reform process has been the devolution of responsibility for management and student achievement to schools. These reforms, coupled with an unprecedented increase in government expenditure in education, have challenged many of the prevailing practices ways in school management. Hong Kong Government passed a legislation in 2004 to require school sponsoring bodies of all subsidized schools to set up an Incorporated Management Committee (IMC) for their schools. The policy had not been implemented at full strength due to the resentment of major school sponsoring bodies (SSBs). It was only until 2010 that schools were required to comply with the legislative requirement.

II. Governance in Education

Based on the management model, school governance is a management practice focusing on how information is managed and channelled, how decisions are made, and how group members interact (Zander, 1994; Leithwood & Menzies, 1998). The rationale is that as correct procedures and processes are fulfilled, the school board will perform better and will add value to the school.

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School governance study is still in the infancy stage in the literature, yet amongst which two divergent themes, focusing on either a micro- or a macro- perspective can be found. The former focuses on improving individual school management practices whereas the latter examines the governmental role in public policy development and implementation. The present study only makes reference to the former.

Literature on school governance is largely informed by studies in the UK. It is generally recognized that governing bodies can contribute to the school by providing critical and informed sounding board for the headteacher and rendering support to school (Scanlon et. Al., 1999). The major focus of these studies is to examine the link between board composition and governance effectiveness.

A. Board Composition and Governance Patterns

School governance is concerned with the system by which schools are directed and controlled. It relates to the authority structure of a school and hence to the arrangements that determine which schools can do, who controls them, how authority is exercised, and how the cost and benefits from the activities they undertake are allocated.

Consideration of the structure and ways of working of governing bodies has led to the development of various typologies. For example, Ranson et al. (2005) developed four types of governance on the basis of the power relationship between the principal and the board chairperson in relations to decision making. These include 'a deliberative forum', 'a consultative sounding board', 'an executive board', and 'a governing body', and it was found that different types of governance result in different patterns of functioning within the governing bodies. The authors, based on the evidence collected from 77 schools in Wales, found the first two types prevalent. Governors were inclined to be reactive rather than proactive in school strategic planning as they considered themselves outsiders without sufficient knowledge of the school situations.

B. Board Functioning and Trust

Identifying the key dimensions of governance that underpin school effectiveness can provide a starting point for addressing existing weaknesses in the literature that only focus on the input-out link. Embedded in the input-output approach is the conception that the board is a homogeneous unit; as far as the board meets the legislative requirements pertaining to

composition and structure, it will function effectively. However, the pattern of board interaction and deliberation when making decisions can have a profound effect on governance and school effectiveness.

In addition, a board is a collective of individuals with diverse background. Their willingness to express opinions, their eagerness to participate, readiness to accept opposing view, etc. in board deliberations are factors affecting the quality of deliberations, which in turn, affect the quality of decisions. It is also found in the literature that the above phenomena will be more likely to happen in a trusting environment (Hoy & Tschannen-Moran, 2003).

III. Theoretical Framework and Research Methodology

A. Theoretical Framework and Objectives

This study aims to serve two objectives: (1) to identify the board role dimensions as perceived by board members in Hong Kong; and (2) to examine the relationship between dimensions of governance and school effectiveness. The effectiveness of schools will be manifested in the dimensions of governance effectiveness and sustainable development brought to schools. The effect of board functioning and trust are also incorporated in the model. The framework is shown in Fig. 1
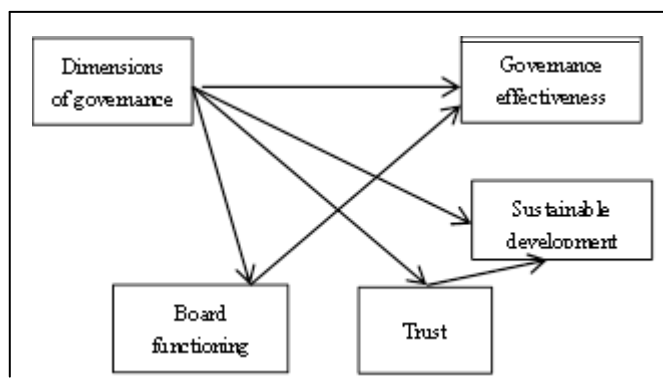

Fig. 1 Theoretical FrameworK

It is assumed that different school boards have different emphasis on different dimensions of governance. Not all dimensions of governance contribute equally to perceived governance effectiveness and the sustainable development of the schools. School board functioning is also assumed to moderate the relationship between governance and the two outcomes, namely, governance effectiveness and sustainable development of school. In addition, interpersonal trust within the school board is also assumed to moderate the relationship between governance and the two outcomes. For example, if the board is functioning smoothly, some aspects of school

governance may contribute more to governance effectiveness and sustainable development than other models. The same is with trust within the school board.

B. Respondents

The present study is a cross-sectional survey using random cluster sampling method. Questionnaires were sent to school managers in 71 randomly selected schools, representing 10% of the total number of subsidized schools in Hong Kong. A total of 177 completed questionnaires were received.

C. Measurement

The scales for measuring board trust, governance effectiveness, and board functioning were adopted from Gillespie's (2003) Behavioral Trust Inventory, Gill, Flynn, and Reissing's (2005) scale for assessing management board effectiveness in non-profit making corporations, and Tam and Kwan's (2013) board functioning scale respectively. These three scales had been previously validated by Tam and Kwan (2013). A 7-point scale was used; the higher the value, the more the respondents perceived that the school boards they served were trusting, effective, and well-functioning. The measurement for dimensions of governance was modified from the work of Ranson and colleagues (2005) describing the ideal role that members sought in boards; a total of 8 items were included. The scale to assess sustainable development comprising 5 items was purposely built for this study.

IV. Findings and Discussion

Given that the scales on governance pattern and sustainable development had not been previously validated, they were first subject to factor analysis and reliability test.

A. Role Dimensions of School Boards

Result of exploratory factor analysis on governance pattern suggests there are three major role dimensions sought in boards; they are (i) the administrative dimension, where governors adopt a rational, pragmatic, and non-confrontational approach of running the school board and promoting school education; (ii) the stewardship dimension, which emphasizes governors as stewards who perceive defending the values and traditions of the school as their primary goal; and (iii) the maintenance dimension, which embraces the prevailing mission and values of schools and preserving the traditions.

The results suggest that school managers in Hong Kong are generally inclined to a stewardship orientation (Mean = 4.3488) followed by administration and maintenance. It is of interest to see that school manager considered they were supporters rather than controller of the schools, although the latter orientation had been dominated in the management literature. Apparently, schools are considered different from business enterprises; school principals are intrinsically motivated and professionally equipped to undertake their

leadership role. Accordingly, the main focus of the board is to render full support.

TABLE I DIMENSIONS OF GOVERNANCE

Dimension	Reliability	Mean	S.D.
Administration	.702	4.2996	1.6791
Stewardship	.555	4.3488	1.6507
Maintenance	.695	2.89771	1.6679

Given that the IMC policy implementation was met with scepticism in its introduction as school sponsoring bodies viewed it more as an intrusion to their terrain of authority than as a school improvement initiative, it appears that schools would be inclined to preserve their values and traditions. The low priority attached to the maintenance dimension is of interest to note. Probably the worries of school sponsoring bodies over the possible diffusion of authority has been dispensed by the urgency to cope with the recent education reforms in Hong Kong including which are the medium-of-instruction policy and the new senior secondary curriculum. These reforms call to boards to support schools than to monitor performance.

B. The Effect of Governance Dimensions on Board Effectiveness and Stainable Development

In addition to the dimensions of governance construct, exploratory factor analyses were applied to examine the factor structures pertaining to trust and board functioning as both of them contained more than 10 items. Shown in Table 2 are the reliabilities and means of the sub-dimensions in the constructs.

TABLE 2 DIMENSIONS OF TRUST AND BOARD FUNCTIONS

Construct	Reliability	Mean	S.D.
Trust-Professionalism	.903	2.2582	.7847
Trust-Reliance	.927	4.0162	1.2978
Trust-Disclosure	.820	3.1726	.8564
Function-routines	.785	2.5409	.7593
Function-participation	.825	2.7633	.8494
Function-conflict resolution	.593	2.2286	.82478
Function-Role of principal	.471	3.4600	1.2588

The exploratory factor analyses reveal that trust comprised three sub-dimensions; they were labelled trust-professionalism, trust-reliance, and trust-disclosure. Trust-professionalism reflected the belief that members had in the boards' ability and professionalism in tackling tasks, trust-reliance referred to members' dependency on others to tackling tasks, and trust-disclosure described members' willingness to unveil their incompetency to other members. Four sub-dimensions were

seen in the board functioning constructs; they were function-routines (preparedness for meetings), function-participation (eagerness to express opinions), function-conflict resolution (willingness to accommodate), and function-role of principal (dominating role of the principal).

As shown in Table 2, trust-reliance (Mean=4.0162) was ranked top whereas trust-professionalism ranked bottom (Mean=2.2582) among the three dimension. The results revealed the controversial feelings of respondents on the boards they serve; on one hand they relied on colleagues to tackling tasks and solve problem but on the other they did not have high regard on others' professionalism of school managers in Hong Kong. The factors leading and approaches to alleviate this feeling are worth exploring in future studies.

The results also showed that board functions were dominated by school principals (Mean=3.4600). Moreover, members considered that boards in Hong Kong were not functioning satisfactorily on their routines (Mean=2.5409), participation (Mean=2.7633) and conflict resolution (Mean=2.2286) as their means all fell below 3.5 on a 7-point scale. The findings call for policy-makers' attention to look into strategies for ensuring effective board functioning.

Having settled with the structures of the constructs, the analysis proceeded to examine the causal relationship among the five constructs in the model, by regression analyses.

The construct of governance effectiveness was first attended to; a regression analysis was run with governance effectiveness and sustainable development as dependent variables. The results of the analysis on governance effectiveness showed none of the three dimensions of governance were predictors of governance effectiveness.

The lack of an association between dimensions of governance and effectiveness suggested that other factors contributing to effectiveness should be considered for a better understanding of the phenomenon in schools. Therefore, the study went further to examine the effect of dimensions of governance, trust and board functioning on effectiveness, using sequential regression analysis.

The three dimensions of governance was entered as the first block, the three sub-dimensions of trust as second block, and followed by the four sub-dimensions of board functioning as the third block. The results of the second block analysis revealed that trust-professionalism (β=.714, p<.05) and trust-disclosure (β=.152, p<.05) were both predictors for governance effectiveness whereas trust-reliance (β=.004, p>.50) was not. The findings may suggest that school managers in Hong Kong were confidence about their competency and thus did not consider it necessary to rely on other members for advices and solutions.

When the effect of dimensions of governance and trust was controlled for, then three out of the four board functioning

sub-dimensions were found to be influential on board effectiveness, they were function-routine (β=.308, p<.05), function-participation (β=.178, p<.05), and function-conflict resolution (β=.126, p<.05). The findings suggested that the group dynamics in board meetings were the most influential factors affecting board deliberations, which in turn, affect governance effectiveness. Accordingly, it is important to explore ways to develop a board environment that is conducive for open deliberations in general and in Hong Kong schools in particular. As harmonious relationships are highly valued in Hong Kong culture, members may have reservation in raising opposing views in board. The optimal solution is often the one which attracts the least opposition among members rather than the best strategy to the school.

A similar set of regression analyses was done with school sustainable development as the dependent construct. When sustainable development was regressed onto dimensions of governance, the administrative dimension (β=.179, p<.05) was found to be the only predictor. The results suggested that an administrative governance model in which members adopted a rational and non-confrontational approach would benefit in the long-term development of schools.

One of the expectations sought in Hong Kong IMCs is to help schools to formulate strategic plans. Formal planning is the process of using systematic criteria and rigorous investigation to establish objectives, decide on activities for achieving the objectives (Bryson, 2011). Plans are of a future-orientation, which are made with a reference to anticipation of the future and on the basis of the present situations. Accordingly, there is always an element of uncertainty in plans. Only if boards are willing to look beyond their schools and to consider the interests of a wider community in their planning process, they can be able to sustain their development.

The sequential regression analyses on sustainable development found a similar effect of trust-professionalism (β=.512, p<.05) and trust-disclosure (β=.178, p<.05) on the dependable as that in governance effectiveness; trust-reliance (β=.054, p>.50) was not a predictor. The regression analysis taking the three blocks of independent variables together reflected that function-routines rust-reliance (β=.334, p>.50) was not and function-role of principal (β=.-.155, p>.50) were significant predictors.

The negative coefficient found in function-role of principal was worth examining. It reflected that the more dominating role a principal had displayed in board functioning, the less likely that the board would be able to maintain sustainable improvement. As discussed earlier, sustainable development is the end to be achieved by the strategic means. To arrive at good strategic plans, schools have to objectively consider the environmental opportunities and threats, to assess the risks and the benefits associated with alternatives. In this connection, a dominating principal may not be able to provide an objective assessment on planning. The lack of a link found between function-conflict resolutions to sustainable development may also be attributable to the contestable nature of strategic planning in which the judgment is often subjective and thus disputable. So unresolved conflicts in boards, which are arisen from members' open expression of divergent views and reluctance to compromise may not necessarily leading to a negative effect on long-term development.

v. Conclusion

This study informs that given the social contexts and stakeholder representation of the school boards in Hong Kong, different school boards tend to give different emphasis on different dimensions of governance, which produce various outcomes that affect the long-term development of the schools. Nevertheless, the smooth functioning of the school board and trust among school managers may alleviate some of the undesirable effects. It is thus advisable for the boards to develop and maintain an environment conducive to open discussion.

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