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Board governance of independent schools

Independent
schools

A framework for investigation

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Abstract

Purpose – This paper develops a theoretical framework to guide future inquiry into board governance of independent schools.

Design/methodology/approach – The authors' approach is to integrate literatures related to corporate and educational boards, motivation, leadership and group processes that are appropriate for conceptualizing independent school board governance processes.

Findings – Shows that the institutional role of an independent school board is likely to be quite different, and considerably more significant than the role of a board of a systemic school.

Originality/value – This paper develops an original theoretical framework that will provide a sound basis for investigation of an important but neglected aspect of educational administration in Australia.

Keywords Schools, Governance, Leadership, Australia

Paper type Conceptual paper

Background

In terms of governance, schools can generally be categorized into one of three categories. For example, in Australia, the largest is the public school sector, comprising state school systems, catering for approximately 67.5 per cent of all school children. Relatively smaller are the Catholic school systems, which cater for approximately 20 per cent of all school children. The third category comprises independent schools, which cater for 12.5 per cent of all school children (ABS: Schools in Australia, 2004). Their respective state or religious bureaucracies ultimately govern schools in the first two categories, whatever the extent of systemic decentralization or devolution of decision-making. Indeed, even if considerable power were devolved to a systemic school board, one could confidently predict bureaucratic intervention if the school board were perceived to be ineffective with negative consequences for the school or system.

The majority of Australian independent schools are separately incorporated as "not-for-profit" companies limited by guarantee. These legal entities are public companies governed by a board of directors sometimes referred to as a school council. However, there are some independent schools such as the Seven Day Adventist schools, the Lutheran schools and a small number of Anglican schools that, at least for



governance purposes, have a systemic structure. This structure comprises a central board of directors with management committees acting as school councils for individual schools. In most of these cases annual budgets and major capital expenditure plans are put forward by individual school management committees for approval by the company's board. In all other matters the management committee acts in the same way as a non-systemic school council or board. Hence, it may be argued that the boards of independent schools and school management committees play a particularly critical role. This is the focus of this article. It should be noted that whilst the above examples are in the Australian context, the analysis that follows should be relevant for all countries in which there are board governed independent schools.

Governance

In general terms, governing boards are common elements of many organizational structures, particularly in the corporate sector. Indeed, some writers have identified a growing interest in governing boards, generally, and argued there is evidence that effective governance contributes to strategic direction and organizational performance (Kroll *et al.*, 1997).

It is generally accepted that governance involves responsibility and accountability for the overall operation of an organization (Bohen, 1995). According to Wood (1996) it involves decisions and actions linked to defining an organization's mission, establishing its policies and control mechanisms, allocating power, determining decision-making processes and establishing organizational culture and structures that facilitate accomplishment of the organization's goals. In independent schools, as in other non-profit organizations, a School Board usually undertakes this role in concert with the Head. The Head and other senior executive staff of the school are usually responsible for the day-to-day management and implementation of the School Board's policies. However, increasingly some school boards appear to have become involved in operational management through sub-committees (Bush and Gamage, 2001), suggesting that it may be more realistic to describe school governance as a shared organizational process of leadership and policy-making. Although the School Board ultimately is legally responsible and accountable, it must authorize the Head and senior executive staff to carry out top-level functions. Thus, governance is not only a board activity but also an interdependent partnership of leaders albeit, an unequal one because only the Board has ultimate authority and has the power to dismiss the Head (Gann, 1998). It follows that boards should not be regarded as closed, but rather, open systems (Scott, 1998).

Governing boards as collective entities

There is general consensus in the corporate governance literature that a board has primary responsibility to pursue the interests of the owners of the organization, the members of the organization, and the wider community, through the effective performance of the organization (Conger *et al.*, 2001; Pierce, 2001). However, one can argue that the role of a school board involves more. In Australia, under corporations legislation the directors of school boards must act in the best interests of their organizations. They also have legal and moral responsibilities to students and parents through the enrolment agreement or contract. Responsibility also extends to other members of the school community, and to the wider community for the conduct of school affairs (Herman and Heimovics, 1994).

A school board has responsibility, first, to determine the school's mission and purpose. A clear sense of mission, clarifying why the school exists and what it seeks to accomplish, is important for most organizations (Jackson *et al.*, 2003; Kaufman and Herman, 1991). Second, it must select and support the Head. The Head is a key member of the leadership team and her or his performance is likely to be an important determinant of the school's effectiveness. Third, the Board has an obligation to evaluate the Head's performance regularly and provide feedback on strengths and weaknesses. Fourth, the Board is responsible for the strategic direction of the school. Fifth, the Board is responsible for ensuring that the programs offered by the school are congruent with its mission, and are conducted effectively. Sixth, the Board as trustee must ensure the probity and careful management of the school's resources. Seventh, the Board should present a positive image of the school to the environment. Last, the Board needs to evaluate and seek to optimize its own performance (Axelrod, 1994; Korac-Kakabadse *et al.*, 2001).

In the United States, a number of researchers (Carol *et al.*, 1986; Danzberger *et al.*, 1992; Goodman *et al.*, 1997; Speer, 1998) have identified several characteristics of effective school governance. These characteristics have included, focusing on student achievement and policy, effective management, development of conditions and structures that allow the Head to manage, agreement on processes to evaluate the Head, communication, trust and collaborative relationships with the Head and between board members, communication with outside groups and government, effective performance in policy making and financial management, evaluation and training, regular board meetings and long term service of board members and Heads. A number of articles (Harper, 2005; Mills, 2005) based on anecdotal evidence, have reported similar characteristics considered to be essential for effective governance in Australian independent schools. However, more research is needed to substantiate these characteristics (Hange and Leary, 1991; Land, 2002), and establish the exact nature of governance activities in Australian independent schools.

A Board's ability to function coherently as one body in its governance responsibilities is not without challenges. Several researchers (Carol *et al.*, 1986; Danzberger *et al.*, 1992; Danzberger and Usdan, 1994) have suggested that many school boards have difficulty working as a single entity. According to Land (2002), traditionally, when board members perceive their role to be that of a trustee, they are able to function as one body. As a trustee, board members represent the collective values and interests of the whole community. However, other stakeholders may place individual board members under pressure to represent their interests in certain issues at board level. In Australia, if the school is incorporated, the directors of the company (the School Board) must act in the best interests of the organisation (the school). They are not representatives of other stakeholders and must not fetter their discretion on the board as a result of representations from others outside of the boardroom. Notwithstanding, research (Carol *et al.*, 1986; Danzberger *et al.*, 1992, 1994; McGonagill, 1987) has suggested that individual board members acting as representatives may hinder the ability of the Board to function as one body. This has prompted some to argue for the Board to be composed of people with diverse backgrounds to ensure multiple perspectives (DeKuyper, 2002). However, a lack of consensus among board members about their role may cause further frustration or conflict, so a Board with a heterogeneous composition could struggle to function as a collective body (Jackson *et al.*, 2003; Land, 2002), for a different reason.

Conger *et al.* (2001) and Coulson-Thomas(1994) have argued that the critical leadership role of the Board makes it imperative that board members learn to work together and reach consensus in order to exercise their authority. It is apparent that more research is needed to investigate how board members can work together more effectively.

Board members

It is widely accepted that Board characteristics are largely determined by the characteristics of individual board members (Conger *et al.*, 2001; Jackson *et al.*, 2003; Zeigler and Jennings, 1974). Desirable attributes include, expertise in areas that are important for the organization, knowledge of the operation and management of the organization and its external environment, ability to make and influence decisions, willingness to commit to the task of governing and to devote time to effective decision making (Conger *et al.*, 2001; Jackson *et al.*, 2003; Macpherson and McKillop, 2002; Robinson and Ward, 2005). However, these attributes alone are unlikely to result in board effectiveness. For example, a board member with expertise must be able to apply and share that expertise in board processes. Similarly, when the mission is unclear, goals are not shared, and strategies are inappropriate, information and expertise may not be enough to ensure board effectiveness (Coulson-Thomas, 1994).

Board chair

Whilst the Board as a whole has responsibility for the organization and should provide leadership (Conger *et al.*, 2001; Jackson *et al.*, 2003), the Board Chair also has an important individual leadership role. The Board Chair should facilitate the work of the Board by planning and running meetings, influencing standards for review and debate, and with the Head and perhaps Board Secretary, by setting the school's agenda (Dulewicz *et al.*, 1995). In addition, the Board Chair should ensure that the Board's processes are transparent, accountable and ethical, and take responsibility for the Board's development (Syrett and Lammimam, 1999). At the same time, the Board Chair must ensure the Board performs as an entity, because no individual board member, even the Board Chair, is able to act on its behalf, unless authorized to do so. Further, the Board Chair ideally should maintain an effective close working relationship with the Head, providing strategic leadership without becoming directly involved in operational management of the school. If the Board Chair takes over the role of the Head, it is likely to confuse the school community, cause the Head to resign, and create difficulties for the school (DeKuyper, 2002).

The relationship between the Board and the Head

Monks and Minow (2001) have referred to the "paradox of governance", namely, how to allow the Board and Head to exercise effective control without diminishing the initiative and motivation of either.

There is widespread consensus that a good working relationship between the Board and Head is essential for effective school governance (Anderson, 1992; Carol *et al.*, 1986; Goodman and Zimmerman, 2000). Positive relationships are characterized by respect, trust, confidence, support and open communication (Anderson, 1992; Carol *et al.*, 1986; Goodman and Zimmerman, 2000), and the Board and Head understanding their specific roles and focusing on the strategic vision and mission of the school (DeKuyper, 2002). In contrast, negative relationships may be characterized by an overload of

information and work for the Board, Board involvement in micromanagement, lack of Board independence from the Head and hasty decisions made by the Head (Carol *et al.*, 1986).

The most commonly reported conflict between the Board and Head has involved role ambiguity (Grady and Bryant, 1991). Several authors (Danzberger *et al.*, 1992; Goodman and Zimmerman, 2000) have argued that the clarification and separation of Boards' and Heads' respective responsibilities is critical for effective governance. However, research supporting this contention is limited and the roles of the Board and Head are interdependent, making complete separation difficult (Land, 2002). For example, the Board relies on the Head to provide it with information in order to make decisions, potentially, indirectly allowing the Head to influence decisions through filtering the information provided (Carol *et al.*, 1986; McGonagill, 1987). Similarly, the Board may be involved in management through sub-committees such as those convened for staff selection (Thomasson, 1997). Nevertheless, other researchers (Kowalski, 1995; Mountford, 2004) have argued that role ambiguity is more a symptom than the cause of the problem.

Another explanation for the difficulties that may occur between the Board and Head is increasing State and Federal government regulation of schools, complicating the decision making processes for the Board and Head (Carol *et al.*, 1986; Danzberger *et al.*, 1992; Kowalski, 1995; Mountford, 2004). Final reasons given for conflict between Boards and Heads are "... the questionable motivations for school board membership and the power struggles between school board members and Heads" (Mountford, 2004, p. 706). Clearly, all of these reasons for conflict between the School Board and Head require further empirical investigation.

Evaluation and development of board performance

Increasingly, school boards are confronted with demands for accountability, and as a result, there is a challenge for both the Board and Head to engage in evaluation. Some research has suggested many boards have formal processes for evaluating the Head, but they rarely evaluate their own performances (Carol *et al.*, 1986; Jackson *et al.*, 2003; Land, 2002; Robinson and Bickers, 1990). Charan (1998) argued that a corporate board should assess its own performance, and performances of individual board members, in order to add value to the organization. However, in the school context, there is only limited evidence (Goodman *et al.*, 1997) that board evaluations contribute to effective governance, suggesting that more investigations are required to examine the relationship between evaluation of the school board and effective governance (Land, 2002).

There is an apparent consensus in the literature (Carol *et al.*, 1986; Charan, 1998; Danzberger *et al.*, 1992; Goodman and Zimmerman, 2000; Macpherson and McKillop, 2002) that board effectiveness could be improved through appropriate development. Several writers (Coulson-Thomas, 1994; Jackson *et al.*, 2003) have suggested that boards have development needs, which are quite distinct, yet many development programs do not reach into the boardroom (Pierce, 2001). Typical barriers include disagreements about the form, content, length of training, training provider and whether it should be required at all (Anderson, 1992; Carol *et al.*, 1986). In addition, Jackson *et al.* (2003) identified lack of time and money, development not being perceived as relevant to the individual or organization, and a lack of awareness of what

is possible and the consequences of doing nothing as barriers to effective board development. In the context of schools, there is little empirical evidence to demonstrate that development improves board effectiveness (Land, 2002). Research is needed to clarify the relationships between board development and board effectiveness.

It is evident from the discussion of school governance so far, that in the context of school boards there may be important relationships between leadership, group processes and the effectiveness of the school board. Therefore, it is appropriate to review salient aspects of the leadership and group processes literatures.

Leadership

Generally, it is accepted that leadership refers to the process of influencing individuals or a group in order to achieve a shared purpose (Chemers, 2001). Hoyt and Blascovich (2003, p. 678) have argued that, "Leadership is an important element of groups, one necessary for directing behaviours of group members in pursuit of common goals". However, traditionally, leadership research has been examined from the perspective of one leader working with a group of followers (Bass, 1985). In the case of school boards, leadership arises in a context different from that traditionally considered in the literature, in that leadership may not be constrained to one leader because all school board members have significant responsibility for leadership. In practice, this may mean that leadership may be performed singularly by the Board Chair and collectively by the School Board. Clearly, the group-based structure of a school board means that leadership is more complicated as leadership roles are shared and the lines of authority and decision making become blurred (Avolio *et al.*, 1996).

Research into teams, indicates that leadership can exert a disproportionate effect, positively or negatively, on group motivation, efficacy and performance (Hackman, 1990; Katzenbach, 1997; Kozłowski *et al.*, 1996; Zaccaro *et al.*, 2001). However, in the group context, it is likely that the effect of leadership on group effectiveness may be mediated by group processes such as collective cognition, collective efficacy and shared group goals. Nevertheless, evidence (Zaccaro and Klimoski, 2002; Zaccaro *et al.* 2001) seems to suggest that, whether leadership is performed by the School Board or the Board Chair, it is essential to understand how leadership contributes to school board effectiveness.

Leadership in small groups

It is widely acknowledged that effectively leading a small (fewer than twenty members) group, as is typically the case for the Board Chair, differs from leading many followers (Fisher, 1993; Horner, 1997). Most views on small group leadership (Kozłowski *et al.*, 1996; Zaccaro and Klimoski, 2002), have emphasized the role of a leader in the development of group processes "relevant to social interaction (e.g. group norms, conflict, cohesion) as well as those relevant to task interactions (e.g. resource sharing, (work) load balancing, coordination)" (Kozłowski *et al.*, 1996). A leader of a group, involved in more complex tasks, such as a Board Chair, may place more emphasis on task relevant interactions as well as social interactions, as research evidence (LaFasto and Larson, 2001) has suggested that coordination, performance and adaptation may be important for group effectiveness (Kozłowski *et al.*, 1996).

The leader of a small group is usually more tightly integrated with the group, has responsibilities such as facilitating, coaching, mentoring, and managing relationships, and requires a different leadership style (Horner, 1997). A number of authors have

identified leadership behaviours, which may be important for effective leadership in a small group. For example, Kozlowski *et al.* (1996), LaFasto and Larson (2001), Temme (1996) and Webber (2002) suggested that providing direction and goals, developing a shared understanding of knowledge, facilitating group processes such as coordination, cooperation and communication, coaching, developing and mentoring, providing information, monitoring performance, and allocating resources efficiently, were important small group leadership characteristics. Dew (1995) suggested that small group leadership requires skills such as encouraging all members to contribute, active listening, conflict resolution, teaching, and group building. Several other authors (Frohman, 1995; LaFasto and Larson, 2001) have emphasized the importance of the management of leader-group member relationships and performance within a group. Many of these leadership behaviours have been discussed in the context of relatively new leadership theories (Bryman, 1992) such as charismatic and transformational leadership. A number of researchers (Avolio *et al.*, 1996; Sivasubramaniam *et al.*, 2002) have argued that the type of leadership required for achieving high levels of motivation and performance within a group is transformational leadership.

Bass (1985) argued that transformational leaders make followers more aware of the importance of task outcomes and motivate them to look beyond their own interests towards outcomes that will benefit the group.

Many studies (Bass and Avolio, 1994; Lowe *et al.*, 1996) have reported that transformational leadership is associated with higher levels of individual, group and organizational performance. However, most research has investigated the effect of transformational leadership on individual followers' performances and effectiveness rather than examining its effect on group processes and group performance (Shamir, 1990). Nevertheless, current empirical evidence (Hackman, 1990; Katzenbach, 1997; Manz and Sims, 1993) on highly effective teams provides support for the contention that transformational leadership is required for high levels of motivation and performance.

Several empirical studies conducted in other settings have suggested that transformational leadership can enhance group performance (Avolio *et al.*, 1988; Barling *et al.*, 1996; Howell and Higgins, 1990). More recent research (Hoyt and Blascovich, 2003; Jung and Sosik, 2002) has indicated that transformational leadership may be associated with increases in qualitative group performance, leadership satisfaction and group processes such as empowerment and group cohesiveness.

Zaccaro and Klimoski (2002) have asserted that although leadership directly influences group performance, it may play a more important role in supporting effective group interaction through group processes. Zaccaro and Klimoski (2002) and Zaccaro *et al.* (2001) have suggested that leaders may influence the cognitive, motivational, affective and coordination components of group processes. First, leaders may facilitate the emergence of effective shared mental models by interpreting the group's environment and communicating this picture to group members (Zaccaro and Klimoski, 2002). Second, leaders may motivate and encourage group members to work hard for the group, by facilitating group cohesion and collective efficacy (Zaccaro and Klimoski, 2002). Third, leadership processes may influence the affective climate of the group. For example, "leaders can reduce collective stress by defining threats as opportunities and increasing support among group members" (Zaccaro and Klimoski, 2002, p. 8). Last, leaders can influence coordination by influencing interactions within the group (Zaccaro and Klimoski, 2002).

A number of researchers (Hoyt and Blascovich, 2003; Jung and Sosik, 2002; Sivasubramaniam *et al.*, 2002) have investigated the effects of transformational leadership on group processes and group performance. They have argued that transformational leaders help group members to align their personal goals with those of the leader, resulting in a shared vision (Jung and Sosik, 2002).

Although there has been some research investigating the effects of transformational leadership in the group setting, an important goal of future research should be to understand the relationships between transformational leadership and group processes, not only in terms of how leadership influences group processes but also, how group processes influence leadership in order to ensure group effectiveness (House and Aditya, 1997; Jung and Sosik, 2002; Zaccaro *et al.*, 2001).

Group leadership

All members of a school board have responsibility for leadership. Consequently, in some circumstances, a form of leadership may be exhibited, which may be termed group leadership and specifically in this context, board leadership. Sivasubramaniam *et al.* (2002) defined group leadership as “the collective influence of members in a group on each other”. It may be argued that this conceptualisation can be extended to collective influence of group members to others outside the group (Jung and Sosik, 2002) and Sivasubramaniam *et al.* (2002) have argued that, as for personal leadership, the type of social influence process required for groups to be effective leaders is transformational. These authors have asserted that group leadership is similar to individual-level leadership, in that relationships are expected to be the same as at the group-level. For example, just as the singular leader provides guidance in the leader-follower relationship at the individual level, the group becomes the guide in the group-member relationship at the group level of leadership (Sivasubramaniam *et al.* 2002)

Research (Hackman and Walton, 1986; Larson and La Fasto, 1989) into highly effective groups and teams has suggested they are characterized by a clear, elevating goal that encourages motivation and commitment of group members (Hackman, 1990; Katzenbach and Smith, 1993). Such groups or teams have developed structures that enable them to accomplish goals, all group members have clear roles, and there is a good communication system and methods for evaluating individual performance (Larson and La Fasto, 1989). In addition, highly effective groups and teams have developed a sense of unity and identification (Cohen *et al.*, 1996; Larson and La Fasto, 2001) and have developed a collaborative climate that leads to the collective coordination and synchronization of individual actions (La Fasto and Larson, 2001; Zaccaro *et al.* 2001)

A number of researchers (Jung and Sosik, 2002; Sivasubramaniam *et al.* 2002) have suggested that the type of social influence process required for groups to become highly effective is leadership that is transformational. Further, these researchers have argued that “leadership at the group level is the same type of leadership that has been described between highly effective leaders working with followers” (Sivasubramaniam *et al.* 2002, p. 69). However, there is a paucity of evidence and much more research is needed to investigate the validity of this argument.

It is evident from this review on leadership that, in the context of the School Board, leadership by the Board Chair and leadership by the School Board as a collective entity

is related to effectiveness and group processes. Nevertheless, knowledge of these relationships remains incomplete, suggesting that an important goal for leadership research is to investigate the relationships between leadership, group processes and group effectiveness.

Group processes

School board effectiveness is arguably related to the effectiveness of board members' interactions in group processes. Many researchers have tried to develop theoretical models to explain group processes and how a group can achieve its goals (Brannick and Prince, 1997; Gibson, 2001; Wong and Sitkin, 2000). Some have tried to identify group behavioural factors related to group performance (Dickinson and McIntyre, 1997; Watson and Michaelson, 1988; Watson *et al.*, 1998, 2002). Cognitive approaches to group analysis have also been of interest (Gibson, 2001; Klimoski and Mohammed, 1994; Mohammed and Dumville, 2001; Nye and Brower, 1996). Some terms such as "team learning", "collective mind", "collective knowledge", "transactive memory", and "collective cognition" have been used to describe cognitive processes in groups (Gibson, 2001; Mohammed and Dumville, 2001; Nye and Brower, 1996; Wegner, 1987; Wong and Sitkin, 2000). It may be argued that a comprehensive model of group processes should take account of cognitive, behavioural and environmental factors (Bandura, 1986, 1997).

Recently, the term "collective cognition" has been used to explain processing of group members' ideas and information. Gibson (2001) proposed a collective cognition model involving four processes: "accumulation", "interaction", "examination", and "accommodation". These processes may sequentially shape a group's decisions and actions in a developmental cycle of idea processing. Gibson's model attempts to explain how group members' perceive and store information, identify the expertise of each group member, negotiate, evaluate ideas, and make decisions.

According to Gibson (2001), accumulation refers to group members' activities in perceiving, filtering, and storing knowledge and information, and facilitating group communication. Interaction refers to retrieving, exchanging, and structuring knowledge and ideas. Gibson (2001) adopted the concept transactive memory from Wegner (1987) to explain the interaction process. Transactive memory is the process of group members' accessing each other's knowledge and information (Wegner, 1987). This begins when individuals learn something about each other's domains of knowledge, skills, and expertise (Mohammed and Dumville, 2001; Gibson, 2001; Wegner, 1987). In other words, transactive memory suggests that people involved in a group activity may format their cognition to know who knows what, and based on this, retrieve the required information from the most appropriate members of their group (Wegner, 1987). Examination is characterized by three activities: negotiating, interpreting, and evaluating. During this process, group members interact to understand and evaluate ideas. Gibson (2001) further argued that group members may influence each other's cognition by highlighting specific information, drawing attention to faulty logic, and presenting arguments in support of specific ideas.

Aspects of Gibson's (2001) model are consistent with organizational learning. Senge *et al.* (1994) suggested that group learning requires two important skills: reflection and inquiry. Reflection refers to "slowing down our thinking processes to become more aware of how we form our mental models" (Senge *et al.*, 1994, p. 237), and

inquiry refers to “holding conversations where we openly share views and develop knowledge about each other’s assumptions” (Senge *et al.*, 1994, p. 237). From this perspective, group learning in terms of improving mental models requires openness to oneself and to other group members (Gibson, 2001; Senge *et al.*, 1994; Schein, 1993). It has been suggested that using reflection and inquiry and improving team learning in school boards can improve school effectiveness (Senge *et al.*, 2000).

Effective leadership may assist group members to interact effectively to improve the quality of their integrated ideas. From this perspective, if leadership of a group provides an atmosphere in which group members openly exchange ideas and constructively evaluate each other’s ideas, the effectiveness of final decisions and actions may be increased.

Another important group construct, collective efficacy, can be an outcome of group processes and also affect group interactions and performances (Bandura, 1997; Gibson, 1999, 2001). According to Bandura, “. . . collective efficacy is defined as a group’s shared belief in its conjoint capabilities to organize and execute the course of action required to produce given levels of attainments” (Bandura, 1997, p. 477). There is some evidence that collective efficacy can predict group performance and effectiveness (Bandura, 1997; Collins and Parker, 2002; Kellett *et al.*, 2000). Collective efficacy may form as the result of group members’ cooperation in processing knowledge and information about each other, tasks, the group’s context, processes, and performance (Gibson, 1999, 2001). Collective efficacy is likely to play an important role in group processes of school boards.

A theoretical framework for future research

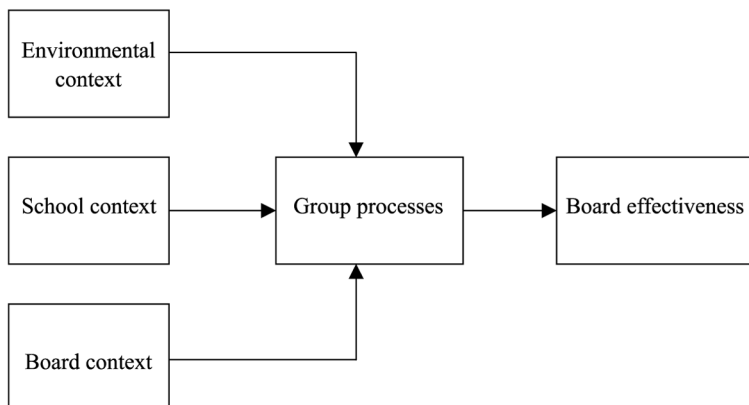
Currently, the research on school governing boards is severely limited by the paucity of empirical investigations. An important limitation is the failure “to treat school boards as discrete units of analysis” (Land, 2002, p. 28). Indeed, school boards are often analyzed and discussed only in terms of relationships with the school heads, without boards being considered in their own right (Land, 2002).

There is clearly a need for rigorous, empirical investigations of independent school boards. It is also evident that a theoretical framework that will guide future research needs to be developed in order to increase understanding of school board effectiveness.

Figure 1 shows a preliminary model based on the literature review above, that may be used to guide future studies. It is based on the governance, leadership and group processes literatures, and represents an initial step in the development of a coherent model to describe the relationships of the variables that may influence school board effectiveness. The purpose of the model is to propose relationships that can be tested empirically (Land, 2002). Figure 1 shows relationships between context and group processes and between group processes and school board effectiveness. Essentially, this model proposes that board group processes moderate the relationship between context and school board effectiveness.

Figure 1 shows the theoretical framework at two levels. The first, macro level, identifies three distinct contexts that could be important for governance processes. The environment is that of the school organization. It is clearly beyond the scope of this paper to discuss details of a complex environment. For example, there is clearly a large number of government agencies that strongly influence independent schools, for example, in terms of funding and various forms of accreditation. Other important

Level 1: Theoretical framework for governance in independent schools



Level 2: Governance constructs embedded in the theoretical framework

Context	Group Processes	Board Effectiveness
Environment	Leadership behaviours transformational transactional task focus group focus external focus	Congruence of school outcomes with school mission achievement of school goals
School	Collective cognition accumulation interaction examination accommodation	Setting of strategic direction ratifying school policies
	Collective efficacy	Evaluation of Board performance
	Group learning	Fulfilling role of trustee
	Shared group goals	Regular evaluation of Head
	Decision-making	Support for Head
	Interpersonal relationships Board members Board members-Head	Ensuring probity of resource management
Board		Boundary spanning

Figure 1.
Theoretical framework for board governance in independent schools

environmental elements, for example, could be competition from other schools or economic conditions. Some parents may be choosing between schools, when selecting a school for their child. Independent schools charging relatively high fees, may not attract or retain as many students during an economic downturn. Such circumstances would need to be accounted for in studying Board policy decisions. The school context, again is likely to be very complex, but the school's culture is likely to play an important role. For example, a board-initiated change could be contrary to established norms within the school and resisted by staff. In such circumstances, one may expect the relative power of the Board, Head and individual staff members to be very important. Board context could also involve issues of how the Board is constituted. For example, members whose main goal for the school is success on the sporting field could dominate a Board, or Board members could also sit on corporate boards and bring "corporate" attitudes to their roles on school boards. Of course these contexts are probably not independent of each other, but it is reasonable to differentiate them to assist conceptualization and facilitate the design of appropriate research methods.

A school board is a group of people, and hence, group processes, identified earlier are likely to be important determinants of board effectiveness. Figure 1 shows a combination of leadership, collective cognition and group dynamics constructs that were argued earlier to be relevant for this theoretical framework. Of course this list is not exhaustive, but does provide a good basis for understanding boards as collections of individuals and as singular entities.

Board effectiveness is unlikely to be meaningful without reference to context. However, constructs consistent with a goal model of organizational effectiveness (Hoy and Miskel, 2001) and the earlier literature review have been incorporated into the theoretical framework. In this sense, school board effectiveness is posited in terms of the extent to which the school's goals are achieved, and extent to which the Board's goals are achieved. Because of the emphasis on the environment, the activity of boundary spanning has been included in the model, acknowledging the institutional role played by boards (Hoy and Miskel, 2001). Boundary spanning consists of activities that link the school and its environment, and when effective involves management of the school's relationship with the environment. Again, this taxonomy is not exhaustive, but rather a starting point for empirical investigations.

Conclusions

Independent schools are named as such because they are not subsystems of education systems and not ultimately governed by educational bureaucracies. This special characteristic lends particular significance to their governance structures and processes. The institutional role of an independent school board is likely to be quite different, and considerably more significant than the role of a board of a systemic school.

This paper has canvassed and integrated relevant school and corporate governance, leadership and group processes literature to argue for a theoretical framework that relates context, board processes and board effectiveness of independent schools. It may be argued that this approach may, in the end, be more promising than focusing only on a small number of important phenomena, such as the relationship between the Head and Board, to the exclusion of other variables. Although based in part on some normative proposals for board governance, this theoretical framework is not intended

to be normative. Rather, it is intended to guide empirical investigations of governance of school boards of independent schools. Because of the innate complexity of each specific school environment and context, the framework is necessarily general in nature. It is anticipated that this framework will guide research into independent school boards that will enrich our understanding and lead to modification of the framework and the eventual development of a valid, empirically derived normative model that can provide guidance for governance practices in independent schools.

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