

Chapter 5

School Images, School Identity, and How Parents Select Schools for Their Children: The Case of Hong Kong

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The case suggests that a school organization adapts itself to the environment and survives external competition through a series of self-organizing processes of differentiation and integration. Differentiation is the process through which the school develops its own identity and core competencies through trial and error; whereas integration is the process through which the school develops stable and sustaining relationships with parents and other strategic partners within the community. The authors assert that in a fast changing and highly competitive environment like that in Hong Kong, schools need to find their institutional identities and to present a positive image to the community. This endeavor is often a challenging and painful task. The authors study the case of a secondary school to illustrate how this can be done, employing a survey approach to ascertain needs and expectations of parents. The dilemma schools face in choosing between academic and pastoral ethos is described and relations between important factors that impact perceptions of parents are discussed.

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INTRODUCTION

Image and identity are important considerations for parents when choosing a school for their children, and also for teachers when considering joining or leaving a school. These factors affect student satisfaction also. Although school image and school identity are two different constructs, they are interrelated. The way a school constructs its identity determines its image; a positive school image can facilitate the process of identity formation.

In research literature, currently there are three schools of thought regarding corporate image: relational, evaluative and impressional, the differences among them resting mainly on the nature of the target audience or stakeholder. The relational school is mainly concerned about different expectations of different stakeholders (Freeman, 1984). When applied to school settings, it focuses on views of both internal stakeholders (teachers and students) and external stakeholders (parents and the community). In the evaluative school, assessment of image of an organization is based on financial performance or value of the organization. Under school settings, it focuses on academic performance of students in public examinations, and/or other tangible performance measures. In a schooling system which emphasizes competition among students and between schools, tangible measures of student performance often become a school's 'competitive advantage' (Hall, 1992). In recent years, there has been an increasing interest in stakeholders' emotional association with an organization, which influences the organization's performance and long-term sustainability. In the impressional school, corporate image, corporate identity and personality become importance factors in determining an organization's long-term survival in a competitive environment (Dutton et al, 1994).

How do organizations adapt themselves to the environment? Bateson (1985) and Csikszentmihalyi (1993) have proposed that biological

and social systems are rather similar in their self-organizing processes because they all follow two distinctive dimensions: integration and differentiation. Integration is the development of partners, coalitions, and collaborators within a social network. The resource dependency theory pointed out that survival and development of social institutions is dependent on acquisition of resources by interacting with the environment, and the nature of these interactions often determines the structure and behavior of these institutions (Pfeffer & Salancik, 1978). Therefore, in order to reduce dependency and uncertainty, institutions often need to develop stable and sustainable relationships, such as strategic partners, working collaborators, and social networks. It has been pointed out that such relationships can help an institution not only to acquire outside resources, but also to innovate (Tam, 2007).

Differentiation is the internal transformation that an institution needs to go through in order to improve its effectiveness. There may be several types of differentiation; the most common are horizontal, vertical, functional and programme (Holland, 1995). Programme differentiation is very important in a school's image formation because it is the means to gain the attention of outsiders. Because public schools in Hong Kong are following the same operational framework and curriculum guides, and are receiving the same amount of resources from the government, unless a school can develop some distinctive characteristics in its programmes, there is little chance it can assert itself in the community.

The processes of differentiation and integration can be seen as two distinctive but interactive dimensions of ways in which a school develops its identity in the community. This is similar to a person interacting with the environment during the process of his or her maturation (Kegan, 1982). Table 1 shows a conceptual framework that describes four potential states of fitness based on the different degrees of differentiation and integration of a school. The integration dimension is

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