School cluster system: A qualitative study on innovative networks for teacher development

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Abstract

This article reports on the literature reviewed and empirical study about the practices of cluster systems. The purpose of the article was to investigate whether cluster systems could be networks that can serve as innovative networks for teacher development leading to quality teaching. Apparent problems include implementation of clusters resulting in incapacity of teachers’ lack of professional support. The findings included understanding regarding emerging changes, exhaustive paper work and conformability. Features of innovative network were not realisable thus cluster meetings should be structured as a framework that can allow teachers’ engagements, continuous interactions and innovation, creativity and mutual benefits.

Key words: cluster system; innovation; teacher development; network.

Introduction

Quality of education has been a concern for decades in South African schools (Simkins & Paterson, 2005; Miller, 2007 and DoE, 2008). This concern has been attributed to several factors such as cluster systems in South African schools are in operation but solely used for moderation of teachers and learners’ portfolios only; teachers received little or no professional support and lack of partnering of teachers within geographic location of schools. Notwithstanding the purpose of cluster system to improve quality education (Nachtigal and Parker, 1990), schools in South Africa are mainly compliant to the submission of portfolios for the purpose grades regarding examination. To address this concern, this article focuses on cluster system as innovative networks key to teacher support and development for the purpose of quality of education and standardization of teaching.

Cluster system in context

Clusters, according to (Chikoko, 2007) are the grouping of schools within the same geographical location aiming to improve the quality and relevance of the education in the schools. Turkey (2004) defines school clusters as a tool that schools can use to promote collaboration, reflection, sharing and learning among the teaching fraternity. Other concepts regarding clustering have been used in United State (US) and United Kingdom (UK), such as, networks, partnerships and joint planning. Teacher partnering is an initiative to foster community and teacher development initiatives based on skills, resources and assets that already exist in the schools (Cole, 2010:15-26). Dittmar, Mendelsohn and Ward (2002); Mendelsohn and Ward (2001) state that school clusters is a group of schools that are geographically as close and accessible to each other as possible; each cluster normally consists of between five and seven schools; one school in each group is selected to serve as the cluster centre; the cluster centre is central and accessible as possible to its satellite schools. Furthermore, the centre has adequate facilities and ideally situated at a
development centre where other social and commercial services are available. Cluster centre in practice set good examples for leadership, management and good teaching practices with a vision to extend beyond compliance to standardisation of practices within the geographic location of schools.

The purpose of school cluster system according to the Basic Education System Overhaul (BESO) (2002-2007) is for teacher development because clusters support teacher capacity to teach effectively according to the new active-learning based curriculum. Cluster system could serve as an innovative network to support, promote and inspire teacher development leading to quality education. One of the ways to approach innovative networks is a new paradigm of establishing microeconomic communities using teachers as major resources and key assets in partnering working together to generate ideas and turning ideas into reality (Cameron & Gibson 2001). The arrangements of such activities are likely to involve a degree of formality such as regular meetings to plan and monitor curriculum development processes. For this purpose cluster system allow group of neighbouring schools to exchange ideas, share resources, and make more effective use of internal and external resources collaboratively. Furthermore, Purcell, 1994 & Rogers, 1991 postulate that total school clusters were based on the programme that are cost effective in terms of collegiality of school engagement, heterogeneous grouping that is maintained and that high expectations for all participants that are maintained across all schools and classroom.

Cluster in global context

Mendelsohn and Ward (2001) argue that the school clustering system in Namibia was developed as a reform in addressing societies need for better education management practices and planning, improved teaching and learning. In their review of the school cluster systems they found that the application of the school cluster systems as a decentralisation tool had enabled a number of good practices such as improvement in the quality of teaching and learning, efficiency in terms staff training and development, co-planning and access to schooling. Furthermore, MacNeil (2004) states that in the Republic of Guinea, clusters were introduced so that all elementary teachers could benefit from on-going in-service professional development programs. The frequency of teacher meetings varies widely from several times a week combined with frequent cluster meetings to weekly to perhaps as often as once every few weeks or once a month. Factors that influence program vigour and success include organisation and leadership; the supply of support material; the degree of system support; and teacher incentives, which may include covering teachers’ costs through payment of per diem, reimbursing travel expenses, certifying teachers for attendance, or officially recognizing and praising teachers’ participation. With regard to Ethiopia, (USAID. 2002-2007) the idea of the cluster programs were introduced in 1995 by BESO project towards better learning and better quality classroom environment.

Cluster systems needs to be clearly presented and explained to build awareness and a clear understanding of its requirements, representations, processes and potentials (Dittmar, Mendelsohn & Ward. 2002). This can be done through information campaigns, workshops and media releases. People working in the education system- teaching staff, cluster committees, subject facilitators and regional education office staff and community - are the most important target audience. According to Chikoko (2007, in Zimbabwe, a management structure funded by the Netherlands government, comprising national, provincial, district and cluster co-ordinating committees was created to run the business of the Better Schools Programme in Zimbabwe (BSPZ). He reported that the state of the BSPZ is run by a cluster co-ordinating committee, ideally comprising two school heads, a resource teacher, one teacher per school, one head of department per school, one area councillor, one School Development Committee (SDC) representative and two co-opted influential members of the community. These are elected at a general meeting of all stakeholders and will elect office bearers from themselves. Chikoko states that the composition of this committee suggests a structure adequately representative of all the stakeholders concerned with the smooth running of schools, thus quite ideal as an instrument for capacity development.
Design and Methodology

The main question in the article was: Are cluster system networks that can serve as innovative networks for teacher development leading to quality education? For this purpose, a case study design and qualitative approach were undertaken to investigate the perception of teachers regarding the cluster system. Twelve teachers in District D3 North of Gauteng province in South Africa were respondent who were reliable insiders purposefully selected based their experiences of cluster systems. Interviews were conducted, data was coded and analysed with the help of an independent coder for the purpose of trustworthiness. The design was consequently interpretive based on the six clusters in the district.

Findings

The findings were primarily based on literature and the empirical. Emerging from the findings were:

- **Three trends regarding their views of clusters**: Teachers indicated that the clusters in their district were not empowering them because there were minimal engagements regarding the sharing of ideas. They confirmed that the clusters were mainly used for conformability to become compliant with the through-put processes leading portfolio moderations. The composition of the members of clusters was not trustworthy in the sense that participants were not fully engaged in the debates around quality teaching. They questioned the attitudes of some of their members in contributing towards the success of the cluster meetings.

- **Regarding curriculum changes**, teachers posited that there were difficulties regarding the understanding and coping with constant changes. Emerging from these responses, they emphasised that there were exhaustive paper work that affected teaching and learning negatively. This implied that there was minimal teaching and learning and more of paper pushing to remain compliant.

- **Ontological realities** that emerged were moderation of portfolios only.

- **Regarding empowerment of teachers and quality education**, teachers indicated that there were few meetings regarding sharing of knowledge to gain more information from other cluster members and facilitators. The capacity of facilitators was questioned. Common question papers were organised in an adhoc manner and did not keep pace with syllabi for different teachers.

Conclusions

Quality of education is a necessity; however, it is not easy to bring about change. Change is a continuous, slow process and the willingness of participants is essential. Several factors have been identified in this article impinging on the cluster system leading to quality teaching processes. It has emerged in the responses that teachers’ attitudes and compliance are the major impediments to quality teaching. It is thus been concluded that teachers who receive little of no professional support are not capacitated to be innovative and creative to look beyond compliance. Notwithstanding the purpose of cluster system to improve quality education schools in South Africa, cluster systems have not been used as expected. I, consequently, suggest that cluster meetings should be structured as a framework that can allow teachers’ engagements, continuous interactions, innovation and creativity to mutually benefit from one another. For a better framework, teacher inspections and community participation is encouraged. For this
purpose, benefits will be economical, allowing access to sharing of extra resources and facilities in their communities. Further research is required regarding the latter.

References


