

School Clusters in Zimbabwe: What Issues Do Clusters Tackle?

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ABSTRACT The study sought to explore teachers' views on the nature of issues handled in clusters and how such issues are important in curriculum improvement. The study adopted a descriptive survey approach in which a combination of quantitative and qualitative approaches were utilised. It considered insights of teachers from schools in one educational district in Zimbabwe. Data were collected mainly through a semi-structured questionnaire administered on a conveniently selected sample of two hundred and forty-two teachers as well as interviews with a purposeful sample of ten teachers. The Statistical Package for Social Sciences statistical package version 17 was used to analyse the quantitative data. Qualitative data was analysed through content analysis and emerging key issues led to themes that guided analysis. It emerged from the study that school clusters handled mostly general administrative and peripheral teaching and learning issues that could not result in major curriculum improvements in schools. The study concludes that there were serious inadequacies in clusters in so far as dealing with issues that could result in curriculum improvement was concerned. The study recommends that school clusters be capacity-built to ensure that they are significant agents of curriculum innovations.

INTRODUCTION

School clusters as a grouping of schools in the same neighbourhood that are brought together for a common purpose (Giordano 2008) operate on the premise that learning is a social process and it requires people to collaborate and share information and ideas. The school cluster system enables knowledge and skills exchange. Giordano (2008:11) observes that;

Teachers need support to accomplish their tasks, to reflect on their day-to-day experiences and to improve their skills; they also need to exchange with others.

The importance of school clusters in ensuring the provision of necessary platform for teacher professional development through collaboration and sharing is, therefore, an important function of clusters for practising teachers.

It is widely acknowledged that teachers are key actors in curriculum innovations. Curriculum innovations usually require a change in teacher practice (Fullan 2001). However, experienced teachers tend not to change their current practice easily because it is rooted in their

beliefs, and in the practical knowledge they have accumulated during their years of teaching (Fullan 2001; Van Driel et al. 2001). If teachers do not have the right competencies to fulfil their new roles or if they are not convinced about the usefulness of an innovation, it becomes a pitfall for innovative projects in higher education. Vandenberghe (2002) contends that for teachers to be fully involved in spearheading curriculum innovation at school level, there is need to enhance professional collaboration hence the need to effective operation of school clusters. School clusters provide a forum for teachers to meet, share and even try out ideas to improve teaching and learning. Riley (2005) further observes that for teachers to operate effectively in spearheading changes in the curriculum they need to have a sound understanding of the curriculum.

Williamson and Payton (2009) observe that a school curriculum is intended to provide learners with selected knowledge, skills and values but there is always a need to reconsider and redesign the curriculum to meet the changing needs of the learners. Teachers are responsible for the implementation of the curriculum and so have to find innovative ways of adapting curriculum to meet the needs of children under their care (Williamson and Payton 2009). This is some form of personalisation of the curriculum. Personalisation is not just about 'tailoring' children's learning: it involves the 'personali-

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ties' of teaching professionals too. Personalised approaches to innovative curriculum design and planning demand a commitment to children's own experiences and perceptions of school. Pilot and Keesen (2008) state that teachers should be on the forefront of instituting innovations in the curriculum. According to Morris (1998), a curriculum renewal out of a problem-solving endeavor is the most effective in bringing about changes in educational initiatives. Such an interactive model is in sync with the situational curriculum model proposed by Skilbeck (1984) in which the major curriculum processes involve analyzing the situation, defining objectives, designing the teaching-learning activities, implementing and evaluating of the program of students' learning in a particular context. As White (1989) proposes, the situational model for school-based curriculum development might better be called a curriculum renewal model, which sees the importance of initiating curriculum renewal by teachers involved in specific school situations as an important starting point. It relates curriculum renewal processes to existing practices, which is essential to the nature of ownership in the teachers involved.

Teachers have to embrace latest approaches in teaching and learning and traditional teacher-centred classroom methods are vastly becoming obsolete. Oguz (2012) points out that the extent to which teachers are able to adapt to new approaches depend on the quality of the teachers. This shows that teachers should be highly adaptable and innovative in order to improve the curriculum. Teachers' activities in school clusters should result in observable improvements to the curriculum through the enhancement of teaching approaches. Such approaches should assist to engage students in experimentation and independent research. Approaches also include inquiry-based learning. Inquiry-based learning mainly involves the learners and leading them to understand. Inquiry here implies possessing skills and attitude which allow one to ask questions about new resolutions and issues while you are gaining new information.

Teachers should also consider collaborative learning strategies in their teaching in which two or more learners cooperate in a learning experience to share and contribute to each other's understanding of a topic and to complete a given task. Collaboration is a natural

part of life and should be included in the curriculum. Collaborative learning is designed to help students to "play well with others," as many of people learned in kindergarten. Collaborative learning should be part of the curriculum.

Syllabus interpretation is one area teachers should exchange ideas on in order to properly implement given curricula. Allen (1984:61) cited in Nunan (1988:7) differentiates a syllabus from the curriculum and states that:

...curriculum is a very general concept which involves consideration of the whole complex philosophical, social and administrative factors which contribute to the planning of an educational program. Syllabus, on the other hand refers to that sub-part of the curriculum which is concerned with the specification of what units will be taught (as distinct from how they will be taught, which is a matter for methodology).

It is imperative for teachers to have the necessary syllabus interpretation skills especially in most developing countries where curriculum is centrally planned with minimal or no teacher involvement and handed down to the teachers for implementation. Improper interpretation of the syllabus widens the disparity between the official and the actual curriculum (Kelly 2009). Official curriculum being the planned curriculum as spelt out in curriculum documents and the actual curriculum being the teaching and learning transactions that take place between the teacher and the learners. Clusters, therefore, as teacher professional network groups for curriculum trouble shooting would do most of the practising teachers a huge favour if they handled issues to do with syllabus interpretation.

Ogott et al. (2010) observe the importance of the teacher's role in being able to select, develop and use appropriate learning materials in teaching. What is clear is that effective teaching is as important as its preparation. Therefore in preparing lessons it is a very important attribute for teachers to be able to select the appropriate learning materials that will enhance learning. Quist (2005) and Beyer and Davis (2012) advance the view that the mere provision of materials to learners in the classroom does not guarantee effective learning but teachers should be skilled in the selection, development and utilization of the available learning materials. In most developing countries there could be a problem of learning materials and

effective teachers are very resourceful in terms of sourcing and improvising the needed materials. School clusters may also play a pivotal role in assisting teachers with skills in resources selection, development and utilization for effective teaching and learning.

Nunan (1998) argues that materials should teach students to learn, that they should be resource books for ideas and activities for instruction/learning, and that they should give teachers rationales for what they do. Nunan (1998) emphasizes that materials control learning and teaching. In many cases teachers and students rely heavily on textbooks, and textbooks determine the components and methods of learning, that is, they control the content, methods, and procedures of learning. Berardo (2006) in reference to language textbooks states that in selection of such books the teacher should consider four factors namely suitability of content, exploitability, readability and presentation. In suitability of content the selected text has to respond to the required outcomes and should also be considered in terms of learners' age, backgrounds and interests. The text should also be highly exploited for teaching purposes as it offers the required skills the teacher wishes to impart to learners. Readability takes into account the font size and the linguistic level of the target learners while presentation solely focuses on how the text grabs the attention of learners. Such information of selection and utilization of materials has to be shared by teachers in their professional networks as some of the issues may not have been thoroughly dealt with during teacher training (Romiszowski 1988).

On the need for close cooperation of teachers in designing learning materials, Ben-Peretz (1990:19) says:

The construction of curriculum materials is viewed as a cooperative effort demanding close collaboration and sharing... Teachers could also construct alternative versions of existing materials, extending their uses through appropriate modification for specific teaching situations.

The foregoing statement shows that curriculum materials need to be adopted and adapted to suit the unique local needs that teachers find themselves in hence the need for school clusters to take seriously the issue of designing appropriate learning materials. Shaw (2010) argues that teachers should take up different roles

as curriculum developers, curriculum makers and curriculum transmitters by adapting curriculum to their classroom conditions.

The need for the teacher to know when, where and how to assess learners is critical in modern pedagogy. The teacher has to have a thorough understanding of what learner assessment is and its philosophical underpinnings. Assessment is a generic term for a set of processes that measure the outcome of students' learning (Trotter 2006). An integrated part of instruction, assessment determines whether or not the goals of the curriculum are met. It is used to measure the knowledge or skills that a student has acquired. There is assessment of learning, which is summative in nature and assessment for learning, which is formative in nature. Assessment should be learner-centered and focused on student achievement in relation to the goals of a course. Rather than being separate from learning, assessment plays a central role in the instructional process. Assessment also sheds light on which methods of instruction are most effective. Through assessment, an instructor gains the requisite information for choosing and utilizing those teaching strategies that best help a learner progress towards the goals of a course. Angelo and Cross (1993) give seven assumptions on which classroom assessment is based:

- The quality of student learning is directly, although not exclusively, related to the quality of teaching. Therefore, one of the most promising ways to improve learning is to improve teaching.
- To improve their effectiveness, teachers need first to make their goals and objectives explicit and then to get specific, comprehensible feedback on the extent to which they are achieving those goals and objectives.
- To improve their learning, students need to receive appropriate and focused feedback early and often; they also need to learn how to assess their own learning.
- The type of assessment most likely to improve teaching and learning is that conducted by faculty to answer questions they themselves have formulated in response to issues or problems in their own teaching.
- Systematic inquiry and intellectual challenge are powerful sources of motivation, growth, and renewal for college teachers, and Classroom Assessment can provide such challenge.

- Classroom Assessment does not require specialized training; it can be carried out by dedicated teachers from all disciplines.
- By collaborating with colleagues and actively involving students in Classroom Assessment efforts, faculty (and students) enhance learning and personal satisfaction.

It is important to note from these assumptions that the teacher has to be fully knowledgeable of the reasons behind learner assessment in order to select the best assessment practices.

Goal of the Study

The study was guided by the question: "What are the teachers' views on the nature of issues handled in clusters and how are the issues handled in clusters important in curriculum improvement?"

METHODOLOGY

Design

A quantitative-cum-qualitative descriptive survey design was employed in this study. A combination of qualitative and quantitative methodologies is normally appropriate for studies that seek to gather more insights from participants beyond those collected quantitatively (Onwuegbuzi and Teddlie 2003). A descriptive survey, as Orodho (2003) describes it, entails collecting data in order to get a detailed description of the status of the subject or situation required. This study sought to ascertain teachers' view of the effectiveness of clusters in spearheading curriculum innovation in Zimbabwean schools.

Sample

Two hundred and forty-two teachers participated in the study. The sample was conveniently selected from school clusters where the researchers had contact persons for easy data collection. Ten teachers were purposefully selected from those who had completed the questionnaire for the purpose of interviews.

Instrumentation

A semi-structured questionnaire was used to collect quantitative and qualitative data whilst

phenomenological interviews were used to collect qualitative data. The questionnaire was used to collect mainly the quantitative data required for the study. The use of semi-structured questionnaires to collect qualitative data has been successfully used in previous studies by Maphosa (2011) whose study on disciplinary measures in South African schools utilised semi-structured questionnaire as the main data collection instrument and the questionnaire managed to gather the data quickly and in a cost effective manner.

Interviews were a supplementary source of data collection in the study in line with the adopted style of combining both quantitative and qualitative approaches in a single study. Interviews were preferred to other forms of data collection as they enabled the researchers to naturally converse with the teachers. This allowed the teachers to freely express their feelings. The interviews also enabled the researchers to probe and prompt on answers given and this flexibility of interviews made it possible for the researchers to gather as much information as possible.

Procedure

The researchers administered the questionnaire with the assistance of contact persons who had been identified in the participating schools. Through the use of trained contact persons the administration was easily done to ensure a high return level. A total of 242 usable questionnaires were returned out of the 300 administered, marking an 81% return rate. This very high return rate could be attributed to the facts that the researcher and contact persons were on the ground to administer and collect questionnaires and the learners themselves were very willing to participate in the study.

Ethical Issues

Permission to conduct interviews for research purposes was sought from the relevant authorities at provincial, district and school levels. The research participants completed an informed consent form after the purpose of the study was explained to them. A semi-structured interview guide was used to guide interviews with selected teachers. Question items were designed in such a way that they gave room for further probing and prompting. All interview proceedings were

initially meant to be audio recorded and later transcribed but participants felt uncomfortable with the use of the tape recorder and the strenuous note-taking method was employed.

Data Analysis

Quantitative data were analysed statistically with the aid of the Statistical Package for Social Sciences version 17 software whereas qualitative data was analysed using content analysis and reporting took form of narratives and thick description.

RESULTS

Biographic Data

The teachers who participated in the study were in the majority male, 91% (n=221), held Ordinary Level as their academic qualification, 69% (n=168), had Diploma of Education as their professional qualifications, 80% (n=193), were primary school teachers, 72% (n=174) and had teaching experience of more than four years 78% (n=190). What could be gleaned from these biographical details is that data was sought from largely qualified and experienced teachers who could provide the required information on the function of clusters.

Issues Tackled in Clusters

According to results on Table 1, 73% (n=177) confirmed that setting common tests as a common issue tackled in clusters, 64% (n=154) indi-

cated that classroom management issues were tackled, 68% (n=164) confirmed the suggestion of teaching methods as an area handled. The suggestion of ways to assist learners with special needs was not confirmed as an issue tackled in clusters by 81% (n=196) of the respondents to the questionnaire. Selecting and providing learning materials was also not confirmed as common issues by 71% (n=171) and 59% (n=142) respectively. Table 1 shows that the common issues handled in clusters included setting common tests, discipline issues, classroom management, syllabus interpretation, suggesting topics to be taught and suggesting methods. Issues that were not commonly handled in clusters included collaborative preparation, suggesting ways of assisting learners with special needs, trying out teaching methods and suggesting content to be taught.

How Issues Resulted in Curriculum Improvement

Qualitative data gathered through individual interviews with teachers revealed different views by teachers on the way their cluster activities resulted in curriculum improvement. Some of the interviewees had this to say;

Interviewee O

The issue of common tests in our cluster ensures that students compete for higher grades in final exam. It is only when students compete that results in schools can improve.

Table 1: Teachers' views on issues tackled in clusters (N=242)

Issue tackled in clusters	Strongly agree				Strongly disagree	
	5	4	3	2	1	Mode
Syllabus interpretation	74	61	10	52	45	5
Selection of topics (where there are syllabus options)	36	37	18	77	74	2
Suggestion of content to be taught to learners	30	26	8	102	76	2
Suggesting appropriate teaching methods	86	78	5	34	39	5
Trying out teaching methods	26	33	13	76	94	1
Suggesting ways of assisting learners with special issues	19	21	6	95	101	1
Classroom management skills	66	88	5	44	39	4
Ways of maintaining classroom discipline	63	72	5	58	44	4
Selecting learning materials	33	27	11	82	89	1
Providing learning materials	47	32	11	75	77	1
Collaborative lesson preparation	35	46	13	66	82	1
Setting common assessment tests	96	81	5	36	24	5
Demonstrating effective teaching methods	28	31	19	65	99	5

Interviewee P

The Ordinary Level History syllabus has just changed and in our clusters we meet to discuss the interpretation of the new syllabus. The source based questions give problems to teachers and pupils and when we meet we share ideas which will benefit the pupils.

Interviewee Q

Handling disciplinary issues is a problem given the view that as teachers we are no longer allowed to beat pupils. We always share ideas on alternative disciplinary practices.

Interviewee R

Due to our cluster activities, our Grade seven results in our cluster have improved which shows that our activities are yielding some positive results.

Interviewee S

We may not have an impact on changing the curriculum but we certainly share ideas to improve our practice.

Interviewee T

Heads in the cluster assist each other in how best to manage schools. This results in improvements on the way schools are managed as Heads share ideas and experiences in various management issues such as discipline and financial management.

The above verbatim quotations summarise some of the interviewees' views on how issues tackled in clusters resulted in curriculum improvement.

DISCUSSION

The revelation in the study that teachers handled issues such as setting common tests, discipline issues, classroom management, syllabus interpretation, suggesting topics to be taught and suggesting methods is consistent with Giordano's (2008) argument of the very purpose of school clusters as providing the needed fora for teachers in a neighbourhood to collaborate and share information and ideas. However,

Bezzina (1991) contends that teachers often fail to engage curriculum at a macro level and would focus on 'safe' areas of professional practice instead of engaging in issues that result in sound curriculum improvement.

The study found that issues such as suggesting curriculum content were not commonly tackled in school clusters. Such a finding corroborates observations by Quist (2005) that teachers should move away from merely making use of readily available materials but should be engaged in selection, development and utilization of the available learning materials. In identifying the multi-faceted roles of a teacher, Harden and Crosby (2000) state that one of the crucial roles of a teacher is to be a learning materials developer. So if in their interaction in clusters teachers do not develop learning materials for use in schools that maybe a problem.

The study found that teachers were not involved in material development in clusters. The issue of involving teachers in material development is seen as a very important component of school-based curriculum development. Oluruntegbe et al. (2010) state that it is the teachers' critical role to provide learning materials for the learners they teach. Clusters should provide for a platform in which teachers meet and exchange ideas that result in the writing of textbooks for use by their own pupils in schools. This is very important as teachers would not wait to use materials developed by people outside the education system who may not be in touch with classroom realities.

The study also found that setting common tests for school in a cluster was one common issue handled in clusters. This finding is consistent with findings by Maphosa and Mutopa (2012) that teachers were more comfortable in dealing with issues related to their day to day issues but did not result in significant curriculum improvements. Maphosa and Mutopa (2012) further argue that teachers' failure to tackle significant issues in curriculum innovation could emanate from their failure to comprehend their full role in curriculum development. Most teachers feel their role is to implement given curricula without any room to adjust and adapt the given curricula to suit the conditions in which they operate.

It further emerged from the study that issues tackled in clusters resulted in relative improvement of teaching and learning as participants

revealed. This finding is consistent with Giordano's (2008) assertion that clusters provided a platform in which teachers in a neighbourhood could meet to exchange for improvement in their teaching skills and expertise. So the realisation that clusters tackled issues relevant educational practice buttresses the very existence of clusters as school groupings with a purpose.

CONCLUSION

The study concludes that clusters in Zimbabwean schools system were creating the necessary fora in which teachers meet to engage on various issues related to the curriculum. Teachers no longer operated as loners in their schools and classrooms but they were provided with the opportunity to meet with fellow professional and share knowledge, expertise and experiences. The study further concludes that whilst teachers were afforded the opportunity to engage with the curriculum the issues tackled in clusters failed to result in major improvements to the curriculum.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Against the findings of the study, the following recommendations are made:

- ❖ School clusters should be well supported from central authorities so that they are able to engage with curriculum at a larger scale. Such support may come in the form of curriculum specialist working with teachers in cluster to assist them in defining their role in curriculum development and suggesting ways of how they can achieve their roles in curriculum development.
- ❖ School clusters should also be well funded so that there are exchange programmes as clusters in different localities should share experiences to enhance cluster operations.
- ❖ School clusters should also be adequately equipped with all the necessary human and material resources. Without a strong resource-base school clusters may continue handling peripheral issues which may not realize significant curriculum improvements.
- ❖ Central authorities may also make use of incentive systems to reward hardworking school clusters in an attempt to create competition among clusters, which, invariably, results in improved practice.

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