MAXIMISING STUDENT SUPPORT THROUGH CLUSTER MEETINGS IN A DISTANCE TEACHER UPGRADING PROGRAMME

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ABSTRACT

In an attempt to improve students' retention and ensure high per cohort completion rates, a student support system of cluster meetings was introduced for the upgrading of teachers from primary teacher certificate to secondary teacher diploma in Malawi. The programme targeted teachers who were teaching in community day secondary schools (CDSSs), despite being qualified for primary school teaching. The distance education upgrading programme was aimed at improving knowledge and skills to enable students to improve their competency in teaching the secondary school syllabuses. As part of the student support system, cluster meetings and study circles were meant to enhance student-to-student support and instil a sense of belonging to a cohort. Both cluster meetings and study circles have continued to be well supported by subsequent cohorts many years after their introduction in the support system. The study investigated how cluster meetings and study circles contributed to the success of students in the programme. Data for the study was collected through individual interviews with programme managers, focus group discussions with cluster leaders, and questionnaires for students and field supervisors. The study found that study circles and cluster meetings united students of same subject combinations in a cohort in the same way that classes provided a sense of belonging in a face-to-face programme. It was, therefore, concluded that cluster meetings provided peer support, which gave further impetus to achievement through increased collaboration in academic assignments.

Keywords: open and distance learning (ODL), field supervisor, learner support system, teacher upgrading, cluster meeting, study circle

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INTRODUCTION

An appropriate support system is necessary to help students in a distance education programme achieve the goals they set individually prior to enrolling in the programme. This is especially true of a teacher upgrading programme, which aims at increasing knowledge and updating the skills of teachers who learn and teach at the same time. Teacher upgrading through the distance mode ensures that the teacher shortfall and quality in deprived schools are addressed at the same time without additional costs to replace teachers who would otherwise upgrade their skills through full-time tuition (UNESCO, 2002). Because teacher upgrading programmes are usually linked to career progression, such as salary increments and promotions, they tend to enjoy high patronage of teachers in service. The candidates that enter such programmes tend to have the greatest desire to succeed and increase their chances of promotion and better salaries in their careers. It is, therefore, important to ensure that the learner support system provided in an open and distance learning (ODL) teacher training programme maximises the number of students who successfully complete the training.

In Malawi, a certificate is a qualification for primary school teachers, while a diploma offered by a university or a college of higher learning is the minimum qualification for secondary school teachers. Due to critical shortages at various levels, teachers trained for primary schools are sometimes deployed to teach in secondary schools. In such a deployment, the teachers are considered underqualified because they lack content and appropriate methodologies for the secondary level. The upgrading programme that was investigated targeted qualified primary school teachers who were teaching in community day secondary schools (CDSSs), but were enrolled to upgrade their qualifications to diploma-level through the distance mode. The CDSS is a secondary school that once operated as a distance education centre where primary school teachers were deployed as tutors to facilitate studies. The change of the status of the distance education centres to CDSSs also changed the role of teachers from facilitators to teachers, as was the case in conventional secondary schools. It was against this background that the distance teacher upgrading programme was introduced to help teachers acquire knowledge and skills while teaching in already deprived schools.

From the outset, the upgrading programme under investigation deployed a field support system that promoted student collaboration. The key components of the support system included a residential phase and a field support phase. During the first eight weeks of the academic year, students were provided with face-to-face instruction by college lecturers to introduce them to the year's work and assignments. The next ten months constituted the field support phase, in which cluster meetings and study circles characterised peer support, while field supervisors – as off-campus staff members of the college – gave administrative support. The field supervisors also gave on-the-spot academic support and encouragement to students to ensure timely attendance to and submission of assignments. By providing regular contact between students on the one hand and between students and their supervisors and lecturers on the other, the support system reduced the isolation experienced by students, which could otherwise have affected their progress (Maroba, 2004, Craig, Kraft & Du Plessis, 1998).

This study examined the contribution of study circles and cluster meetings to learner success in the upgrading programme. Both the cluster and study circle meetings provided face-to-face support, which added a human voice to the learner support system (Modesto & Tau, 2009).

The question under investigation was the following: To what extent did study circles and cluster meetings influence student performance in the upgrading programme?

The cluster meetings were held once a month to deal with administrative matters, which included issues of communication from the college or to the college through field supervisors. Study circles, on the contrary, were subject combination-specific and enabled students to discuss academic matters, including assignments and problems related to their profession. In both meetings, the students enjoyed the feeling of not being alone in their study programme.

The inclusion of study circles and cluster meetings was important to provide students with peer support, which is critical for professional growth. Peer discussions engaged students deeply in new knowledge and skills that, in turn, helped them to meaningfully internalise what they learnt. It is against this background that the study aimed to examine the extent to which cluster meetings and study circles provided students with opportunities to learn and succeed in the programme.

METHODS

The study used mixed methods of data collection, despite using a largely descriptive qualitative design. The purpose of the design was to create meaning of the practice, which has been maintained for a period of ten years since its introduction.

The design depended on drawing from participants their constructed meaning of what they considered to be the value of the study circles and cluster meetings in the learner support system. It was of interest to draw from the participants their perceptions or feelings of the support system in ensuring that the design helped to answer the question of interest (Richards, no year). The qualitative data was supported by quantitative data drawn from closed-type items, which were included in the questionnaires for students and field supervisors. It was of interest to quantify responses as frequencies or percentages to facilitate the interpretation of the data. For this reason, both qualitative and quantitative results have been reported in the findings of the research.

Several stakeholders were sampled to participate in the study as informants from whom data was collected. The key informants were the students who were the direct beneficiaries of the learner support system. The students were divided into two categories, cluster leaders and ordinary students. One hundred students were randomly selected from existing lists to complete questionnaires that specifically focused on the perceived value and contribution of the cluster and study circle meetings. The questionnaires were distributed during the residential session when students came together to write the first semester examinations. This approach helped to increase the return rate of the questionnaires to 78%.

The cluster leaders who participated in focus group discussions were purposely selected by the programme managers who knew them well. They comprised both men and women, who could contribute freely in discussions as key informants, and were drawn from both humanities and science combinations. There were eight participants in each focus group discussion for humanities and science, which raised the number of teacher learner participants to 94. This number was considered representative enough, considering that using both questionnaires and interviews to collect data from the same target population ensures richness in the depth and quality of information drawn for purposes of research (Fraenkel & Wallen, 1993). In addition, information was sourced from 16 field supervisors through questionnaires. Independent interviews were conducted with two key managers, who coordinated the activities of the programme. In all, there were 112 participants from whom data was drawn for the study.

The open questions in both the interviews and the questionnaires were analysed qualitatively by identifying themes and unique responses of a qualitative nature. Of interest was the need to establish whether the cluster meetings satisfied the academic or administrative needs of the students in the programme. Unique responses, which revealed the feelings of the students, were of interest to provide the qualitative aspects of the findings. The closed questions in the questionnaires were quantitatively analysed with the help of the SPSS computer software package. The data called for descriptive statistics of frequencies and percentages to provide summaries of the most expressed opinions on which conclusions have been drawn. The two analytical approaches increased the accountability of the wealth of the data collected in the study. This, in fact, facilitated the triangulation of the information, which guaranteed the study's depth in dealing with the problem that would otherwise have been missed had only a single method of data collection and analysis been used. Extracts from open questions in the interviews and questionnaires have been reported as evidence of qualitative responses and tables have been used to report quantitative findings. The inclusion of quantitative analysis made comparison between groups possible, as each could be tabulated with their frequencies and percentages.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Qualitative and quantitative findings have been presented together and not separately to emphasise the fact that mixed methods were used to triangulate the data and provide deeper meaning of what was observed. Data triangulation is a way of strengthening the evidence that had been unearthed in support of the arguments presented in the discussion of the findings.

Creation of environments that sustain learning

The study circle and cluster meetings provided learners with consistent contact with supervisors and fellow learners, which created safe learning environments in which they could ask questions, reveal their uncertainties and explore new dimensions in their studies (O'Rourke, 2003). Both students and field supervisors indicated that study circle and cluster meetings fulfilled different, but complementary purposes in support of student learning. The former mostly facilitated academic discussions with groups of different subject combinations and the latter allowed for the participation of all teacher learners in the affairs of the cluster members and also dealt with administrative matters led by a field supervisor. The field supervisors promoted less formal interaction with the students through attendance and spot checking on study circle meetings. The study circles were conducted more frequently (at least every fortnight), while cluster meetings were conducted once a month.

It was reported that, in study circles, students tended to meet in groups of subject combinations to conduct academic discussions. The agenda was guided by content topics and assignments prescribed for each semester. From the interviews with programme managers and cluster leaders, it emerged that students used the interactions to share resources and skills in teaching the various topics they were assigned to teach in their classes. It was clear from the responses that the study circles were seen as anchors of the programme to which the success and sustainability of learners could be attributed. By putting emphasis on subject combinations, the study circles were conducted with a specific agenda that helped learners to discuss problems that were specific to their subjects. This ensured a detailed analysis of the academic problem and possible solutions that could be collectively generated.

It is not surprising that all participants felt that the study circle meetings greatly helped clarify issues that would otherwise have been difficult for individual learners to do. In responding to the question of what would happen if study circles were taken out of the support system, one student said: "There would be total disaster because students are not confident to tackle assignments on their own before they check with their colleagues. I am sure some would withdraw from the programme before submitting the first assignment in which much peer assurance is required."

Table 1 provides a summary of how teacher learners felt about the usefulness of the study circle meetings in supporting their learning in the ODL programme.

Table 1: Teacher learner perceptions of the usefulness of study circle meetings

Reasons for maintaining study circle meetings in ODL	Percentage
Helping each other in assignments	92
Helping each other in clarifying difficult areas	78
Helping each other to improve the teaching of difficult areas	11.5
Others	44.9

For the students, the major reason for maintaining study circles was to enable them to help each other with assignments. This reasoning is consistent with their response to the question of how they benefited individually from the study circles. The majority of the participants attributed their success or high performance to the support they received from their peers in the study circles. These results confirm what other authors have indicated about the value of discussion groups in ODL programmes, such as providing opportunities for tutoring (Moon, Leach & Stevens,

2005, Maroba, 2004, Thuteotsile, 2004), reducing isolation, which undermines efforts to study in rural settings (Craig, Kraft & du Plessis, 1998), and promoting the spirit of sharing learning resources, which are often scarce (Jenkins, 2004). Resource-sharing is evident in the manner in which teacher learners of the same subject combinations cite similar references in assignments. One of the managers interviewed in the study stated: "Students use study circles to share resources. I see assignments in my subject are often completed using the same sources per cluster, which is an indication that study circles enable students access the same sources."

Providing socialisation opportunities and a sense of belonging

In the category 'Others' in Table 1 were a variety of reasons that showed some unique responses regarding the benefits of the programme to individuals. Among the reasons were welfare matters that demonstrated opportunities for socialisation. Apart from reducing isolation and affording the individual members a sense of belonging to a group, the study circles offered opportunities for developing trust among group members, which became the basis of sharing resources. This was important in a country where resource scarcity has been exacerbated by unwarranted competition among teachers in various schools. It is common to see neighbouring schools reporting serious disparity in terms of human and material resources, despite being funded from the same budget. Another important factor that demonstrates lessons from study circle groupings is the opportunity for students to express or learn organisational skills. This was particularly noticeable when the college coordinated field activities through cluster leaders in the absence of hired field supervisors for two years. At the time, the initial contracts of the field supervisors had expired and the college used cluster leaders to coordinate administrative activities in the field. The students performed their roles satisfactorily, except for those matters that were purely academic in nature. For example, it was ethically challenging to allow one student to collect assignments from others and send them to the college as field supervisors do.

Providing administrative links with the training institution

The teacher learners also saw the attendance of the cluster meetings as obligatory and as a means of sustaining themselves in the programme. For both meetings, no-one reported never attending the meetings. The majority indicated that they frequently attended the meetings, as shown in Table 2.

Table 2: Summary of frequency of teacher learner attendance of cluster and study circle meetings

Frequency of attendance	Study circle	Cluster
Most frequently	46.2	46.2
Often	44.9	41.
Rarely	9.0	12.8
Never	0.0	0.0

It was clear that students felt obliged to attend both meetings. The results were not specific to gender or subject combinations, as all respondents showed that they attended the meetings regularly. The few that selected "rarely" as a response also indicated distance or lack of partners with similar combinations as their reasons for not attending the meetings frequently. The students' responses regarding their attendance of the meetings were consistent with the expectations of the programme managers who felt that the attendance was obligatory for all students. The managers emphasised that the meetings were the only reason for which the students could be allowed some time off from their schools to attend to academic work in their course. The college management had, from the onset of the programmes, negotiated with Ministry of Education officials to allow the students time off on a school day once a week or fortnightly for the purpose of attending such meetings. The managers also felt that the support that the students gave each other through the meetings contributed substantially to the high success rates and minimal dropout rates registered in the programme.

With regard to cluster meetings, it was generally observed that the majority of the respondents regarded them as administrative in nature. The meetings were held in the presence of a field supervisor to share information about the programme and to afford learners the opportunity to submit assignments or receive communication from the college, including marked assignments. Table 3 provides a summary of what teacher learners and supervisors felt were the contributions of cluster meetings to the whole learner support system of the programme.

Table 3: Summary of how cluster meetings provided learner support

Contributions of cluster meetings to learner support	Responses per group of participants (percentage)	
	Field supervisors	Students
Facilitating important communication	62	88
Facilitating the submission and receipt of assignments	78	51

Contributions of cluster meetings to learner support	Responses per group of participants (percentage)	
	Field supervisors	Students
Discussing welfare matters concerning the cluster	47	25
Other	9	7.7

The results generally demonstrate agreement between learners and field supervisors on the factors that were first articulated in the interviews with cluster leaders and managers of the programme. The cluster meetings generally satisfied the administrative functions of the programme under the leadership of field supervisors. In supporting this, one of the students in a group discussion said: "You cannot miss cluster meetings because that is where you meet the supervisor to give marked assignments or submit assignments that are due. Sometimes you go to the venue of the meeting very early to get the assistance of others on the assignment before it is submitted."

It was, therefore, clear from the findings of the study that both cluster and study circle meetings provided learning environments to individuals and groups of students. Cluster meetings were considered to be important forums for the exchange of ideas and resources that were necessary in the programme. The findings were consistent with the original plans of the support system of the programme in the field phase.

Opportunity for professional growth

Although many students who completed questionnaires did not see the improvement of teaching as either the reason for or the benefit of the study circle meetings, it remains an important factor for the teacher programme delivered through the ODL mode. An upgrading programme for teachers would fail to enhance quality improvement if it only encouraged the acquisition of additional content without regard to how the teachers would improve the practice of teaching in their classrooms. Apart from understanding difficult areas covered in the course materials, students in the study wanted to make an immediate impact on their teaching as though they were already qualified. By enrolling in the programme, they felt that they could immediately do better in their teaching because they were exposed to both the materials and techniques of qualified secondary school teachers. This turned out to be the case because the major drive for them to enrol in the programme was to get the respect of a qualified teacher at the schools in which they taught. It is, therefore, not surprising that some of them reported

how the study circle discussions helped them to improve their teaching. This was consistent with the observation that adult learners typically want to be able to link what they are learning with their life and work (O'Rourke, 2003).

It was, therefore, inevitable for the students to expect the programme to offer them opportunities to practice teaching in the areas of their professional interests. It was reported that, at times, group discussions were diverted to deal with how to teach a topic that had direct relevance to the syllabus they were teaching. This was a necessary extension of the intellectual discussions to accommodate the professional needs of the most inquisitive students who saw opportunities for the immediate application of what they had learnt. In this way, the discussions in the study circles usually moved from mere intellectual interactions to professional enrichment through the horizontal process of consolidating individuals' support to ensure cross-fertilisation of ideas on resources and techniques of teaching that were relevant to specific topics. One student expressed this experience as follows: "Before I joined the programme, I experienced difficulties teaching some topics of the Biology syllabus. Through discussions and sharing ideas and examples in our study circle, I have gained some competency to teach the topics."

CHALLENGES AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Both learners and managers, including field supervisors, cited distance from the school to the venue of cluster or study circle meetings as a hindrance. This was particularly a problem because students used their own money to travel and attend such meetings. In a number of cases, modifications to the schedules have been made either to hold study circles fortnightly as opposed to weekly and/or to rotate the venues of the meetings to balance the financial demands of the meetings for different students. In areas where more than two students of the same subject combinations were present in one school or at the same locality, a study circle would be established to reduce transport costs. The supervisors were also advised to ensure the rotation of cluster meeting venues so that distance does not affect the same students in the same way all the time. The system was difficult to monitor because of distances to be covered and the financial limitations that were usually experienced. The programme managers depended on reports from field supervisors or cluster leaders in the absence of the supervisors. Usually such reports were about student attendance or absenteeism and not about the academic or professional discussions that took place. In some instances, learners followed up on those who failed to attend the meetings as a way of encouraging them.

An additional challenge was that of cash needed to buy food and refreshments for members whose meetings went beyond lunchtime. Both students and field supervisors reported this as a serious problem, especially because the project that started the programme made provision for refreshments every time students and supervisors met in cluster or study circle meetings. The college management was, on several occasions, petitioned for consideration of this aspect. The programme managers shared the view of the college management that such a service would not be possible in view of budgetary constraints. In addition, it would be difficult to monitor accountability of such a service, even if money was available for it. The concern was indeed genuine because it was reported that some groups resorted to taking monthly contributions for drinks and snacks during the meetings. There were also indications that some students were pressing their school heads to contribute towards transport and refreshment expenses during the meetings. There seemed to be no easy solution to this problem considering the fact that the programme was expanding. It would be appropriate for the training institution to recognise such expenses as additional costs of the programmes when reviewing students' fees.

It was also observed that some students abused the arrangement to embark on their own personal errands without attending the meetings, yet they were absent from teaching in their schools. This is a challenge because some head teachers saw the arrangement as an excuse for those teachers who just wanted to miss classes. It was, therefore, difficult for some head teachers to grant permission for students on the programme to be away from their duties to attend the meetings. Despite the once-off communication, which the Ministry of Education made regarding the arrangement at the beginning of the programme, the college management was asked to clarify the arrangements from time to time to sustain the cluster meetings and study circles. The demands of the head teachers were not unusual in the context of the serious teacher shortages experienced, especially in rural schools. Although the meetings ensured the success of the learners in one way or the other, it is necessary for the management of the programme to seriously monitor the meetings to curb abuse. It should be necessary to ensure that the meetings are carefully integrated into the resource demands of the schools so that the support system does not further deprive the schools of their teachers, as is the case in full-time programmes (UNESCO, 2002). There is also a need for the programme managers to deliberately regulate cluster and study circle meetings in such a way that they meaningfully meet the needs of all students, with their agendas being made available to school administrators for collective support.

The current setup of study circle meetings favours subject combination groupings based on the year of study. It was observed that the arrangement further isolated the learners of minority subjects, who could not usually have anyone of their year and subject combination in the same locality. There was evidence that the students continued to meet and discuss within the same cohorts and not across years. The system, therefore, denied those who had already gone through the course an opportunity to help those who came after them. This explains why some students felt isolated, even when they had seniors of the same combinations in their cluster. It is, therefore, recommended that programme managers plan assignments that are subject focused rather than syllabus prescribed to allow students of different years to engage in discussions across broader perspectives once in a while. Such an approach could promote collaboration between students based on the subject area rather than being specific to the year of study.

From the managers' point of view, the most serious challenge of cluster and study circle meetings was the enforcement of learner dependence on group work. It was observed that weak learners mostly depended on the contributions of others when responding to individual assignments. College lecturers were bothered with similarities in some responses to assignments by students from the same study circles, which could be a sign of a serious offence of plagiarism. Apart from demonstrating the learner abuse of study groups, the problem also challenged the way lecturers come up with assessment tasks, which failed to get unique responses based on the creativity of individual students. If students discuss factual questions exhaustively, it will be to the advantage of all to copy the points raised during discussion groups. While factual presentations would be expected to be similar, students get distinctions when they try to apply or provide examples and illustrations that demonstrate unique interactions with the material that has been fully understood. It could be necessary for the college lecturers to deal with the problem by improving on assessment tasks so that more challenging responses could be expected.

CONCLUSION

Both cluster and study circles provide the opportunity to sustain learners in the programme. This is particularly important in a country with serious resource limitations where learners do not have access to a computer, telephone and/or electricity connections and supplies in their homes, as well as a poor postal connection (Jenkins, 2004). The print material that the learners receive upon enrolling in the programme remains the most precious information, which must be fully understood in order for them to make progress in the programme. Therefore, the groups in the study circles have been used to achieve the maximum benefit from the course of study. The meetings accorded teacher learners with the opportunity to understand the coursework and improve their pedagogical skills to complete their teaching assignments better. The meetings reduced learner isolation and they also increased the learners' motivation to stay in the programme and successfully complete their training.

The use of cluster and study circle meetings helped the students to recognise fellow students as an important resource for their progress in the programme. They used the meetings to support each other both academically and professionally. In addition, the meetings provided opportunities for socialisation and practising organisational skills, which teachers need. An upgrading programme is essential when it focuses on teacher growth as a whole and not just on the academic side of the teacher. It was clear that the use of the cluster and study circle meetings helped the students to see the potential of their fellow students in facilitating their own academic and professional growth. It is not surprising that they all generally supported the continuation of the support system for the retention and success of the students in the programme.

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THE POLICY AND PRACTICE OF PLACEMENT OF PUPILS IN NIGERIAN PRIMARY SCHOOLS:
A PARADIGM FOR EDUCATIONAL SUCCESS

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ABSTRACT

Nations continue to strive to improve their education systems through various strategies and plans. Some of these are outcomes of research on various aspects of education; hence the need for continuous research on all aspects of education.

Based on this, the present study aims to assess how school administrators handle the issue of the placement of pupils in classes in Nigeria. The study, designed as a survey, used questionnaires and interviews to elicit responses from the sample. A total of 382 teachers, who participated in a workshop organised at the National Institute for Educational Planning and Administration, constituted the sample. A contingency analysis, as well as a t-test, was used to analyse data.

Results showed that most schools adopted the random placement criterion, an observation that was not a chance phenomenon, but reflected the actual practice in the schools sampled (X2 computed = 520.76 > X2 table = 21.69, @ .05 level, 12df). Results also showed that older schools used this practice more than the relatively newer ones. A t-test showed that between the educationally advanced states of the south and the educationally backward states of the north, the practice was the same (F computed 1.3 < F critical 1.3 @ .05 level). The implication is that a heterogeneous rather than a homogeneous class grouping is created that offers both low and high achievers the opportunity to interact and learn from one another, with the less academically bright pupils benefiting from the brighter ones. The implication of this and other appropriate recommendations are discussed to aid overall education success in Nigeria.

Keywords: pupil placement, educational success, educational planning and administration

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