Teacher Clusters or Networks as opportunities for learning about science content and pedagogical content knowledge

by

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Abstract

Changing classroom practice is a difficult and complicated business. It involves challenging both what teachers know and do in their classrooms. It involves a process of re-configuring both teacher knowledge and practice. Many attempts at teacher development have had less than spectacular results in this regard. This study explored one such attempt of a teacher development programme that was aimed at challenging and reshaping teacher’s science content knowledge (CK) and pedagogical content knowledge (PCK), with the aim of influencing classroom practice.

Using Shulman’s argument on the importance of uncovering teachers’ knowledge, this study investigated teacher clusters or networks and the opportunities they provide for science teachers to collaborate and share their knowledge and classroom practices. The collaboration was intended to strengthen science content knowledge (CK) and pedagogical content knowledge (PCK) in order to improve classroom practices. The context of the study was a professional development intervention on science and mathematics in Mpumalanga; the Mpumalanga Secondary Schools Initiative (MSSI) funded by the Japanese International Co-operation Agency (JICA), where the teachers met regularly to share knowledge and experiences in smaller groups commonly referred to as Teacher Clusters.

Qualitative research methods in the form of case studies were used to investigate and understand how these clusters helped science teachers in particular to challenge and change their CK and PCK by working collaboratively. The study presents two case studies of science teacher clusters, and examines the interactions and mechanisms by which the clusters constituted resources for teacher learning and improvement in teaching practice. The major findings of this research are that:

- Teacher clusters indeed provided better resources for changing the classroom practice of science teachers by allowing them to focus specifically on their CK and PCK and the interactions between the two forms of teacher knowledge
• Most importantly, teacher clusters also functioned in such a way that they allowed teachers a substantially more and better set of collective resources from which to begin and sustain changes in classroom practice.

In making these major findings, this research established the critical role of the structure and leadership of the cluster in helping to create conditions for successful clustering and teacher change. The study concluded by observing that clustering or networking does provide teachers with enhanced opportunities for professional growth and classroom change. Variations in forms of clustering and teacher leadership issues within the clusters still require further investigation and research than this study was able to provide.
Acknowledgements

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I owe my greatest debt to my family for their support and encouragement throughout my studies.
Declaration

I declare that apart from the assistance acknowledged, this thesis is my own assured work. It is being submitted for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy at the University of Pretoria, South Africa. It has not been submitted for any degree or examination at any other university.

Thembi.C Ndlalane

27 July 2006.
# Table of Contents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Title Page</td>
<td>i</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Abstract</td>
<td>ii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Acknowledgements</td>
<td>iii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Declaration</td>
<td>v</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Table of Contents</td>
<td>vi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>References</td>
<td>x</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>List of Appendices</td>
<td>xi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>List of Tables</td>
<td>xii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>List of Figures</td>
<td>xiii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Definitions and Abbreviations</td>
<td>xiv</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Chapter 1. An Investigation into Clusters or Networks as Opportunities for Learning about Science Content and Pedagogical Science Knowledge

1.1 Study Overview
1.1.1 Personal Drivers
1.1.2 Teacher Development
1.1.3 Theoretical Drivers
1.2 Clusters as aid to teacher development
1.3 Mpumalanga Secondary Science Initiative
1.4 Statement of the problem
1.5 The organization of the study

Chapter 2 Literature review

2.1 Introduction
2.2 Meaning of knowledge as viewed by researchers
2.2.1 Content knowledge (CK) and pedagogical content knowledge (PCK)
2.2.2 Conceptual framework
2.2.3 Knowledge of practice
2.2.4 Knowledge in practice
2.2.5 Knowledge for practice
2.2.6 Knowledge construction
2.2.6.1 Knowledge construction through reflection
2.2.6.2 Knowledge construction through sharing
2.3 Teacher development
2.3.1 Traditional approaches to teacher development
2.3.2 New and innovative approaches to teacher development
2.3.3 Cluster approach
2.4 Summary

Chapter 3 Research Methods

3.1 Introduction
3.1.1 Description of the field
3.2 Research design
3.2.1 Methodological approaches used
3.2.2 Sampling
3.2.2.1 Sampling of documents
3.2.2.2 Sampling of clusters
3.2.2.3 Sampling of schools
3.3 Research Instruments and data sources
3.3.1 Interviews
3.3.2 Observations
3.3.3 Instruments, Structure, Purpose and Processes
3.3.3.1 Classroom case Scenarios
3.3.3.2 Cluster Simulation
3.3.3.4 Regional Cluster Workshop
3.4 The Process of data collection based on Questions
3.4.1 Research question one
3.4.2 Clusters in Mpumalanga
3.4.3 Research Question two
3.4.3.1 Simulation as a tool to collect data
3.4.4 Research Question three
3.4.4.1 Observations and field notes
3.4.4.2 Interviews and classroom observations
3.5 Reliability and Validity of data
3.6 Problems and Resulting Limitations
3.7 Research ethics in data collection
3.8 Data Analysis
3.9 Summary

Chapter 4 The structure and formation of clusters
4.1 Introduction
4.2 Summary of the Administration Management Structures
4.2.1 Formation of clusters
4.2.2 Dominant clusters 75
4.2.3 Dynamics of formation and structure of clusters 79
4.2.4 External clusters 85
4.3 Summary 88

Chapter 5 Challenging and changing teachers’ content knowledge (CK) and pedagogical content knowledge through cluster activities

5.1 Introduction 89
5.2 Case study one 90
5.2.1 The structure of the SIM cluster 92
5.2.2 Cluster leaders’ content knowledge 93
5.2.2.1 Conceptualization of energy 93
5.2.2.2 Conceptualization on growth and soil 96
5.3 Uncovering teachers’ knowledge 100
5.3.1 Barriers to sharing 100
5.3.2 Fear and confrontation of knowledge 102
5.3.3 Construction of knowledge 103
5.4 Second case study 108
5.4.1 Challenging the structure 108
5.4.2 Challenging the structure through collaboration 113
5.4.3 Sibonelo cluster teaching 115
5.4.4 Classroom experiences 117
5.4.5 Challenging CK and PCK through reflection 121
5.4.6 Challenges of clustering 124
5.4.7 Sibonelo cluster – a reexamination 125
5.5 Comparing the two cases 127
5.6 Teacher collaboration 131
5.7 Cluster operation within the structure of the MDE 133
5.8 The operational structure at the Sibonelo cluster 133
5.9 Summary, conclusion and implications for further research 134
5.10 Improving the quality of teachers’ CK and PCK 135
5.11 The research design of the study 138
5.12 Key Findings of the Study 139
5.13 Implications 144

6. References 147

List of Appendices

Appendix 1. Map of the Mpumalanga Province 158
Appendix 2. Mpumalanga Secondary Schools Initiative document 159
Appendix 3. Brief Summary of the MSSI Project 191
Appendix 4. MSSI Regional Workshop document 197
Appendix 5. Cluster meeting programme 198
Appendix 6. Cluster meeting questionnaires 199
List of table

Table 1. Cluster definitions and characteristics 35
List of figures

Figure 1. Schematic presentation of my conceptual Framework 22
Figure 2. Illustration of the three regions of Mpumalanga 39
Figure 3. Composition of a dominant Clusters in Mpumalanga 41
Figure 4. Simulated Cluster 41
Figure 5. Data collection point at Sibonelo Cluster 42
Figure 6. Curriculum Implementers Workshop 57
Figure 7. The Regional Cluster Leaders’ Workshop 58
# Glossary of Terms and Definitions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Term</th>
<th>Definition</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>C2005</td>
<td>Curriculum 2005 is the new curriculum that was introduced in South Africa by the National Education department</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CASS</td>
<td>Continuous Assessment is the assessment procedures policy adapted by South Africa to take into consideration all the performance of tasks by the learners</td>
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<td>CES</td>
<td>Chief Education Specialist is the person who is in charge of the specific subject at the provincial level</td>
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<td>CI</td>
<td>Curriculum Implementer is the subject advisor whose responsibility is to support teachers on specific content knowledge</td>
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<tr>
<td>CK</td>
<td>Content Knowledge is the knowledge of the subject matter</td>
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<tr>
<td>CL</td>
<td>Cluster Leader is a teacher who is selected to be a facilitator of a cluster</td>
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<tr>
<td>CM</td>
<td>Circuit Manager is the person that is in charge of a number of schools and activities in the circuit</td>
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<td>DCES</td>
<td>Deputy Chief Education Specialist is the person that is assisting the person that is in charge of the specific subject</td>
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<td>EHL</td>
<td>Ehlanzeni region is one of the three regions in Mpumalanga which means the low veld</td>
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<td>FET</td>
<td>Further Education and Training is the level of education that is made up of three grades 9 to 12 which are the final last years of schooling</td>
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<tr>
<td>GET</td>
<td>General Education and Training is the senior primary and the junior secondary school grades (4-9)</td>
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<tr>
<td>GS</td>
<td>Gert Sibande is one of the three regions in Mpumalanga</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HOD</td>
<td>Head of Department of the specific subject /s at the school level</td>
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<tr>
<td>INSET</td>
<td>In-Service Training is the training and the development of teachers who are already teaching</td>
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<tr>
<td>JICA</td>
<td>Japan International Cooperation Agency</td>
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<td>JP</td>
<td>Japan</td>
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<tr>
<td>M&amp;S</td>
<td>Mathematics and Science</td>
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<tr>
<td>MDE</td>
<td>Mpumalanga Department of Education</td>
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<td>MSSI</td>
<td>Mpumalanga Secondary Science Initiative</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NCS</td>
<td>National Curriculum Statement is policy document issued by National department of education in S.A. that is a guide on the implementation of the new curriculum</td>
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<tr>
<td>NKA</td>
<td>Nkangala is one of the three regions in Mpumalanga . Nkangala means Highveld.</td>
</tr>
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<td>NUE</td>
<td>Naruto University of Education in Japan</td>
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<tr>
<td>OBE</td>
<td>Outcome-Based Education is an approach adopted by South Africa for its New Curriculum.</td>
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<tr>
<td>PCK</td>
<td>Pedagogical Content Knowledge is the knowledge that is imparted in the classroom</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
PD Professional Development means the process of engaging teachers with the aim of improving their teaching profession.
RNCS Revised National Curriculum Statement is the modified policy on the implementation of the new curriculum
SEP Science Education Project is the Non Governmental Organization that helped teachers to improve their science teaching
Sibonelo The name given to the external cluster which means Exemplary
SIM Simulated cluster is the created cluster that modeled how the cluster could operate in helping teachers to learn from each other
UP University of Pretoria