

# School cluster system for quality education in rural Namibian schools

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Accepted 28 March, 2018

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## ABSTRACT

This study sought to discover the challenges facing the implementation of School Cluster System in Oshikoto region. Five Cluster Centre Principals (CCPs) and twenty eight teachers were sampled as participants. Questionnaires, documentary analysis and focus group interviews were used as research instruments for the study. Questionnaires were administered to CCPs and focus group interviews were carried out to teachers. The documentary analysis provided information from the Circuit office on how schools were clustered. The study established that while the implementation of School Cluster System was a positive move for education decentralisation and sharing of resources between schools, the system did not have a legal policy framework to regulate the system operations, and no resources were made available to schools for the implementation and management of School Cluster System activities. The study recommended that educational planners should pursue the legalisation of School Cluster System. In the meantime, it was necessary for principals and teachers to be provided with rewards and adequate resources for implementing School Cluster System activities.

**Keywords:** Cluster, cluster centre, school cluster system, decentralisation, satellite schools, cluster centre principal.

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## INTRODUCTION

In the past few years, school systems around the world have begun some form of decentralisation of education with a focus on local decision-making and community participation. Decentralisation is concerned with the transfer of authority and responsibility from higher to lower levels of authority or from national levels to subnational and local levels (Ed et al., 2014). Decentralisation may also be defined as the transfer, in varying degrees, of decision-making powers from central government to intermediate authorities, local authorities and educational institutions (UNESCO, 2005). The significance of the transfer ranges from simple administrative decentralisation to a transfer of regulatory and financial powers of greater scope to regional and local level. The process of decentralisation in education

may considerably improve transparency, administrative efficiency, improved financial management, enhanced quality and accessibility of services. A decentralised education system would be more efficient, more compatible with local priorities and strongly encourage local participation in the educational affairs (UNESCO, 2005).

Different countries have embarked upon different forms of educational decentralisation, such as dividing educational administration from central government into provincial, regional and circuit administration. The School Cluster System is one of the latest forms of educational decentralisation that emerged in recent years. School Cluster System refers to the grouping of schools that are geographically close together in order to share

educational resources and instructional materials with the purpose of improving the quality of education (Dittmar et al., 2002). The system allows neighboring schools to practice cooperative learning by sharing educational resources and teaching methodologies, and ensures that available human capital is exploited to the advantages of all schools in the cluster. One school, which was strategically located, is chosen as a cluster centre, where other schools, known as satellite schools, can access resources.

Education decentralisation in Africa runs the range from limited de-concentration of functions from the central offices of the education ministry to its regional offices, to communities financing and managing their own schools (Winkler and Gershberg, 2003). Some countries have devolved the delivery of education to regional governments, and others have devolved it to local governments and community boards. South Africa and Zimbabwe are some of the African countries that have decentralised their education functions through School Cluster System.

In South Africa, the quality of education has been a concern for decades, because the cluster system was not implemented holistically to foster partnership and sharing of teachers' expertise and methodology, but solely used for moderation of teachers and learners' portfolios only (Mphahlele, 2012). Teachers could only work together in getting their subject portfolios ready for submission and grading. The submission of portfolios was the only aspect that could indicate the presence of School Cluster System, rather than the mass partnering of teachers and sharing of best teaching practices. In addition, teachers received little or no professional support relating to cluster system operations, which minimised the required partnering of teachers within geographic location of schools.

In Zimbabwe, Chikoko (2007) reports that School Cluster System appears to be well managed, due to management structures funded by the government of Netherlands, comprising of national, provincial, district and cluster co-ordinating committees, which were created to run the business of the Better Schools Programme in Zimbabwe (BSPZ). The author reveals that the management of the BSPZ was 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 members are elected at a general meeting of all stakeholders and will elect office bearers from themselves. The cluster coordinating committee is adequately representative of all the stakeholders concerned with the smooth running of schools, thus quite an ideal instrument for cluster system management, capacity development and school improvement (Chikoko,

2007).

Comparatively, schools cluster system failed to improve the quality of education in South Africa, as the system was not applied holistically, but only related to the administration and submission of teachers and learners' portfolio for assessment. On the other hand, School Cluster System proved to have worked well in Zimbabwe, given representative cluster coordinating committees that were charged with the responsibility of ensuring the viability and sustainability of the system, while at the same time improving school effectiveness. There is limited literature detailing Namibia's model of implementing the School Cluster System and its effectiveness thereof. Whether Namibia has implemented School Cluster System holistically or relating it to a particular aspect of teaching and learning as in the South African context, formed an aspect that this study sought to discover. In addition, whether there were management structures with enough resources in Namibia, for the management of the system, was to be established by this study.

In Namibia, education administration has been managed at Regional and Circuit offices until the rise of the School Cluster System in Namibia during the nineties. With the arrival of the School Cluster System, education administration was decentralised from Circuit offices to cluster centres after realising that important determinants of quality education were based at local level. The most important role players for the quality of our education and many of the significant resources for improving education were located at the local level, hence there was need to grant local residents jurisdiction and autonomy from central government (Schneider, 2003). Education stakeholders at local level were therefore to be included in the management of education in their areas through School Cluster System.

Educators often focus more on decisions and programmes at the national levels. But in practice, it was teachers, along with learners who made schools and their educational programmes what they are (MEC 1993). In addition, parent participation in School Governing Bodies (SGBs) serves as an important ingredient in building democracy and participative leadership in the schooling system (Mncube, 2009). To empower these human resources and their endeavors in making schools rewarding places, there was a need to decentralise both responsibility and authority from central to local levels. On this ground, School Cluster System was regarded as the latest and best form of education decentralisation to be implemented in Namibia in order to improve school performance through a decentralised administrative functions and sharing of resources.

Chronologically, education administration was decentralised from the central government to the Regional councils, then to the Circuit offices, and then to the cluster centres, down to satellite schools. School

Cluster System remains beneficial to rural schools, which are often located in remote areas and far from national and regional offices. Their remoteness creates difficulties in accessing services needed to advance teaching and learning at their schools. If services can be decentralised to schools in their locality, accessibility to services would be easy which can then facilitate smooth educational provisions.

In Namibia, School Cluster System was introduced to the Rundu Education Region as a pilot phase in 1996. The Basic Education Project (BEP) spearheaded the introduction of School Cluster System (Dittmar et al., 2002). All the schools in the region were included with the aim of having a comprehensive cluster system to accommodate all the needs for grouping schools in one stable framework. The system was beneficial to schools as they could share resources and best teaching and learning practices. In addition, accessibility to services at cluster centres have reduced travelling distance and costs, and saved great deal of time, which could then be used productively for teaching and learning.

Benefits which arose from the Rundu Education Region pilot phase, led to the subsequent development of similar clusters in all other regions of the country by 2001. Even though the system was beneficial to education administration, teaching and learning processes, the system was faced with challenges in its sustainability, with regard to its implementation, monitoring and evaluation. This research project focused on the challenges faced by the implementation of School Cluster System in improving the quality of education, particularly in rural schools that are far from services provisions due to their remoteness.

### **Statement of the problem**

School Cluster System was implemented in order to enable schools to function as a team, plan and organise together the functions of their respective schools. The system also makes resources decentralised, readily available and easily accessible in the locality at a cluster centre. Despite these benefits, little evidence and in some instances, no practice was evident to prove that the cluster system was operational in the region. This study was largely prompted by the fact that schools were operating in isolation and not as a team as anticipated by the system. In addressing this gap, this research was conducted to discover the challenges that faced the implementation of the School Cluster System and how such challenges can be addressed.

### **Significance for the study**

Although this is a small-scale study, the findings may

help to inform educational planners and policy-makers in Namibia, about the strengths and limitations of the School Cluster System as implemented to manage education, particularly in rural settings. It is through research findings that challenges were to be discovered, so that necessary improvements were to be made to School Cluster System for better results. The outcomes of the study will contribute to the existing pool of knowledge on educational decentralisation, by advancing new insights about School Cluster System operations. The study will contribute practical suggestions on how the current policy frameworks and practices of School Cluster Systems can be improved so that the system yields best design, implementation, monitoring and evaluation strategies that speak to anticipated outcomes.

## **METHODOLOGY**

### **Research design**

The main goal of this study was to discover the challenges faced by the implementation of the School Cluster System in Oshikoto region and how these challenges affected the successful functioning of the School Cluster System. In order to achieve this goal, a qualitative case study was conducted. A case study allows an exploration from multiple perspectives of the complexity and uniqueness of a particular project or programme functioning in a real-life context, and provide specific and contextually rich data (Simons, 2009). In case studies, the aim is to provide an explicit context of a phenomenon, out of which new insights can be developed (Moriarty, 2011). Insights from the case study can then be transferred to other situations with similar conditions. A case study design was relevant as the study endeavours to address more contextual issues, and explain why certain behaviours have occurred, their causes and effects, in a particular setting (Yin, 2009).

### **Sampling and participants**

Participants consisted of CCPs and teachers in Circuit 1. Participants were sampled by means of purposive and convenience sampling, as forms of non-probability sampling. In non-probability sampling, the researcher has no way of forecasting or guaranteeing that each element of the population will be represented in the sample and some members of the population have little or no chance of being sampled (Leedy and Omrod, 2005). Since in non-probability sampling the researcher has the prerogative to judge the population and produce the sample, bias cannot be ruled out. To prevent bias in sampling, the researcher sampled participants from all the cluster centres in the Circuit so that the findings

represent all schools in the Circuit under these cluster centres.

Five CCPs were sampled by means of purposive sampling. Chiromo (2009) explains purposive sampling, which can also be referred to as judgmental sampling, as a sampling technique in which the researcher handpick the subjects to be included in the sample. The subjects are selected on the basis of the researcher's judgments of their typicality to the phenomenon of study. CCPs were sampled as they were in charge of cluster centres, and were charged with responsibility of overseeing the overall implementation, monitoring and evaluation of the cluster system activities. This positioned CCPs in better positions to articulate the state of affairs regarding cluster system operations. CCPs possess significant observation on cluster system in terms of how involved their satellite schools were in the system and what challenges were faced.

Eighteen teachers were sampled by means of convenience sampling, six teachers from each school. These schools falls under the cluster centres in the Circuit. Convenience sampling, also known as accidental sampling, makes no pretense of identifying a representative subset of a population (Leedy and Omrod 2005). Convenience sampling simply takes people that are readily available at the disposal of the researcher. The study sampled six teachers from three different schools, six teachers from a primary school, six teachers from a junior secondary school and six teachers from a senior secondary school. These were the schools that were in proximity with the researcher, and the researcher wanted to gain views on the implementation of the School Cluster System from the teachers' own perspective, in their immediate school community.

### **Data collection methods**

Data were collected by means of questionnaires, focus group interviews and document analysis. In determining, the questions and issues that were asked in the questionnaires and focus group interviews, a comprehensive literature review was conducted to inform question formulation as supported by Slater (2011). The questionnaires were administered to the CCPs. Questionnaires were suitable for CCPs given their work schedule, of managing both their schools' affairs, as well as the affairs of cluster centres. Hence, it was necessary to administer questionnaires to them so that they could respond at their spare time. On data presentation, the anonymity of the CCPs was safeguarded by using pseudonyms for coding such as Principal one (P1), Principal two (P2), and so on, to relate specific data to participants during presentation. Their cluster centres were named as Cluster A, Cluster B and so on.

Semi-structured focus group discussion interviews were conducted with teachers. Three focus group

discussions were held, with each group consisting of six members. The semi-structured nature of the interviews allowed the researcher to generate a considerable amount of data about the participants' opinions and experiences with regard to the phenomenon of study (Moriarty, 2011). In conducting the focus group interviews, the researcher used an interview guide and recorded the responses from the participants in a notebook. For anonymity of participants, the researcher coded the responses such as Teacher one (T1), Teacher two, (T2), and so on, to relate specific data to participants during presentation.

As focus group interviewing explores the views of diverse groups of people, the researcher was able to unpack different perspectives within the group in relation to the topic of discussion (Choy, 2014). In addition, asking a group of people to respond jointly to common questions yielded varied and detailed data on the topic under study (Dudwick et al., 2006). The open ended questions were used to gather data from both the questionnaires and focus group discussion interviews. The open-ended nature of the questionnaires and interview questions provided opportunities for both the researcher and participants to discuss the challenges faced by the School Cluster System as a decentralisation strategy in more detail as supported by Hancock (2002).

Data collection that is structured in an open-ended manner, allow participants and respondents to raise applicable issues that matter most to them (Yauch and Steudel, 2003). Comprehensively considered, the open-ended questions in the questionnaires and those discussed in the focus group interviews, enabled the researcher to gain a large amount of information and particular opinions about the challenges that faced School Cluster System in the region. The researcher also analysed applicable documents in the Circuit office to establish the total number of schools in the Circuit, the total number of cluster centres and how satellite schools were allocated to cluster centres. Circuit 1, was use as a code to protect the anonymity of the Circuit office.

The quantitative data that was gathered from the analysis of relevant documents was presented into the bar chart and discussed concurrently with the qualitative data. The qualitative data was analysed according to the themes and patterns which emerged as a result of a process of inductive categorisation (Atieno, 2009; Johnson and Onwuegbuzie, 2004). The data was then interpreted in relation to the existing literature, as well as referring to the verbatim excerpts from the interview data because they carry authenticity and a rich density of meanings for the research intentions (Ruddock, 1993).

### **Data collection procedures**

The research environment consisted of five cluster

centres in Circuit 1, Oshikoto Education Directorate. The Regional Director provided the approval to conduct the study. The researcher visited the research sites and explained the research objectives to the participants and obtained informed consent from the participants. Participants were informed that participation was voluntary, and all participants were given background information about the study, regarding the fact that the Regional Director has granted permission, as well as the anonymity and confidentiality surrounding the research. After a time schedule was agreed with the participants, questionnaires were administered to the CCPs. The researcher agreed with the respondents that returning questionnaires be done through the Circuit office so that the researcher could collect them. CCPs were given two weeks to respond to the questionnaires.

To ensure that questionnaires were administered effectively from the beginning to the end, questionnaires were prepared and placed in envelopes together with self-addressed returning envelopes so that the respondents incurred no costs. The researcher had also made questionnaire follow-ups through telephonic conversations to cater for questions that could not be clearly understood by respondents and to request returns of completed questionnaires. While CCPs were attending to questionnaires, the researcher was engaged in focus group interviewing with teachers at their respective schools, and visiting the Circuit office for documentary analysis.

## FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

### Benefits of school cluster system

Generally, most participants revealed an understanding of what school clustering system was all about, and indicated a number of benefits linked to the system. However, these benefits were only to be reaped *“if the system was practiced accordingly, as current observation do not present convincing evidence that School Cluster System was alive and well”* (P3). If the system was implemented effectively, teaching and administration could be conducted in a collective fashion, which could have helped better planning and organising of those functions resulting in the smooth running of schools within a geographical area. The system could also provide grounds for improved school performance as teachers could then share good common teaching practices through peer observation and assistance.

The system was essential for nurturing and strengthening the spirit of cooperative learning among teachers of different schools, as P1 revealed that *“School Cluster Systems could contribute to desired quality education through identifying and solving common problems together in order to improve learner*

*achievements”*. In addition, T8 pointed out that the system also *“allows schools to set the same standard in terms of tests and cluster examinations”*. This could have helped teachers who are expert in methodology and content pedagogy to share good teaching practices and questioning techniques with new teachers, helping them to become better educators and examiners at their respective schools.

Despite the above benefits associated with School Cluster Systems, some participants expressed dismay as *“some of the satellite schools were reluctant, they had many perfect information and materials but they kept it secret for their own benefit”* (T5). This was also supported by T4 that *“some schools regard other schools as competitors and were therefore not willing to share their best teaching practices with other schools”*. This implied that despite efforts to prevent schools from operating in isolation, there were still evidence that some schools did not embrace the School Cluster System. The study discovered the following major challenges hampering the effective implementation of School Cluster System.

### Challenges of school cluster system

#### Legal requirements

There was a lack of legal policy framework on how cluster activities were to be managed, resulting in some of the principals being ineffective in the administration of the cluster system activities as *“CCPs were not mandated by any legal policy”* (P3). On the same note, P1 revealed that *“CCPs were to be delegated to act as Inspectors of Education for the Circuit, and oversee the operations of the Circuit office in the absence of the Inspector of Education”*. CCPs were said to be delegated to do the work and not appointed. There has been no letter of appointment detailing appointment conditions as no legal framework exists to cater for such provision of CCPs acting as Inspector of Educations. Equally, executing cluster system activities did not fit to be regarded as delegation, as it was a permanent execution of duties by CCPs, and not a caretaker responsibility in the absence of the owner. It was a system whose operation was dependent on guidelines and circulars. As a result, principals and teachers involved in the implementation of the system did not feel obliged to fulfill the tasks associated with the system. The fact that the system was not gazzeted made the system exploitative to its implementers as they were to do extra work without being rewarded. Principals and teachers served on cluster committees, and CCPs have acted as Inspector of Educations, yet no rewards for these extra works were given to them.

Although working on an acting capacity was a

remunerative appointment in terms of the Namibian Public Service Act (Act 13 of 1995), this was not the case with CCPs. CCPs were instructed to act as Inspector of Education, and performed duties that the Inspector of Education normally performs for remuneration. However, CCPs did not get remunerated for acting as Inspector of Education. This was the exploitative part of the system. This caused the standoff in the cluster system operations, and participants felt that *“if the ministry of education was convinced that School Cluster System was the best approach on how schools should improve performance, then the ministry should have legalised the system”* (P4). A proper legal framework would have ensured benefits were accrued to those involved in cluster activities so that they were motivated to keep the system operational. Although there may be merits for the School Cluster System to have operated informally, its formalisation would have made it sustainable in the longer term (Dittmar et al., 2002). This legalisation would have prevented the exploitation of staff members, and made the system viable and sustainable in the long run.

### **Lack of operational resources**

There were no resources in place such as human, material, infrastructural and financial to effectively administer School Cluster System activities. There were no funds appropriated for school cluster activities, and any operation was dependent on the cluster centre and satellite schools' budget. There were no vehicles designated for the management of cluster activities, and *“using your own transport or hiking when doing cluster activities was a challenge in itself”* (P5). It was unfair to expect principals and teachers to implement the cluster system activities in the absence of resources with which to implement the activities. For example, it was difficult for the CCPs to supervise operations at satellite schools if there was no transport allocated for such function. This prompted participants to demand that *“transport should be made available when necessary so that the CCPs can coordinate and monitor the cluster activities effectively”* (P3). Another participant, P2, supported the same view that *“availing transport mainly for cluster activities would have improved the operations of the cluster system”*.

In terms of infrastructure, there were no venues specifically meant for cluster activities at cluster centres. The lack of venues such as cluster offices and halls prevented cluster meetings to take place. Combining two or more class groups in one class in an attempt to create venue for scheduled cluster meetings, was detrimental to the learning process. As a result, no school principal wanted to disturb the learning time of their learners, resulting in attendants remained idle in corridors and getting demoralised to attend cluster meetings in the future. Infrastructural development to cater for the

implementation of the system activities such as scheduled meetings was thus a necessity.

In terms of human resource needs, no designated personnel were employed specifically to deal with cluster activities and whom the cluster centre principal should have supervised. Personnel should have been appointed to assist principals and teachers implement the system activities because currently the workload is just too much for them. P1 suggested that, *“all CCPs should be released from teaching activities, so that they have enough time to deal with administrative matters for, firstly, their schools and secondly, for cluster centre activities”*. It was imperative to have appointed designated staff members to take a lead in cluster activities when principals were engaged in other administrative matters of their schools.

Another critical limitation was funding. This research established that there were no funds appropriated specifically for cluster system activities by national treasury. Funds were the means through which implementation of activities were to be made possible, hence the absence of funds also delayed the implementation of school cluster activities. There were no funds appropriated for cluster activities as the system was not legalised and therefore unrecognised for treasury considerations. If the system was legalised, a budget would have been put aside for the implementation of its activities. This would have made it easier to implement cluster activities and produce anticipated outcomes without financial pitfalls. The lack of fund resulted in cluster centres not being developed to better serve their satellite schools up to expectations. One participant felt that *“cluster centres were supposed to be developed so that they were in a better position to cater for their satellite schools”* (P4). To better serve satellite schools, Dittmar et al. (2002) emphasised that cluster centres should meet the following requirements:

- a) The cluster centre should be as central and accessible as possible to its satellite schools, with adequate facilities and ideally be situated at a development centre where other social and commercial services are available.
- b) A cluster centre should set good examples for management and teaching practices.
- c) The principal of the cluster centre should be a strong and committed manager, with a vision that can extend beyond his or her school to the needs of all schools and the community in the cluster.

While cluster centres were expected to serve as a hubs of resources for all schools linked to them (satellite schools), schools that were selected as cluster centres did not met optimally the above requirements. They were therefore not developed to enable them to serve other schools due to limited funding. This made it difficult for cluster centres to assist satellite schools as expected.

Drawing insights from the literature evidence, this paper argues that the cluster coordinating committees in Zimbabwe, which were funded by the government of the Netherlands, was what made the School Cluster System viable in that country. This was because both human and financial resources were provided to render the system effective and relevant. The Zimbabwean case was unfortunately, not the case in Namibia in its entirety. The similarity is that Cluster coordinating committees were established. However, these committees were not representative of all stakeholders with interests in education like in Zimbabwe. Instead, these committees comprised only of teachers who were often elected by their schools without considering their competencies.

A representative committee would have drawn in people with best expertise on policy implementation and management. In addition to un-representative coordinating committees, no funding were made available either by national treasury or donors to facilitate the execution of cluster activities after its national implementation in Namibia. This was in comparison with the assistance that the Zimbabwean case was getting from the government of the Netherlands to manage the system. In Namibia, the BEP only provided assistance for the piloting in the Rundu Education Region, and not for the overall, national implementation of the School Cluster System. This left the system implementation vulnerable due to limited funding.

Unlike South Africa, Namibia's implementation model appeared holistic, covering all aspects of teaching and learning and promoting partnership between teachers. However, its vain was informed by the lack of resources with which to implement system activities. The benefits reaped from School Cluster System during the pilot phase in the Rundu Education Region, was owing to the assistance of the BEP, yet this assistance was not extended to the overall implementation of the cluster system nationwide, and the national treasury did not step in to rescue the situation. This jeopardized the anticipated success of the system as initially achieved during piloting phase. This paper contends that with regard to the availability of resources and management structures in place, Zimbabwe's model of implementation for School Cluster System, presented good lessons for Namibia to learn from, and Namibia needs to adopt the Zimbabwean model in its context to make the system fruitful.

### ***Improper clustering of schools***

The aim of School Cluster System was to group schools that were geographically close to each other into one entity. This was however, done without considering the grade phase that such schools were offering, which resulted in clustering schools that did not have any common interests to share. The mismatch in clustering

schools did not serve the intent of the system as *"primary, combined, junior and senior secondary schools clustered in one cluster Centre, resulted in schools not assisting one another"* (T12). Such mismatch in grouping schools of different phases into one cluster has created pitfalls in the effective management of the cluster system. From document analysis, the following bar chart shows how the schools were distributed into Cluster Centres according to their grade phases in Circuit 1, Oshikoto education directorate (Figure 1).

It was evident that almost every cluster centre had a combination of schools of different grade phases, which *"made it difficult for schools to share resources"* (T14). A senior secondary school clustered with a primary school did not have significant common practices to share with each other, in terms of contents, instructional resources, teaching aids and assessment methods. This resulted in schools operating in isolation rather than in groups as anticipated. Only one Cluster Centre (Cluster D) has a perfect combination of schools. The Onayena cluster was the best cluster in terms of school clustering, as the whole cluster was comprised of schools with the same grade phase, and this made it easier for primary schools in the Cluster Centre to share common available resources to advance the frontiers of teaching and learning processes at their respective schools.

### ***Time constraints and workload***

Since there were no designated human resources employed specifically to cater for cluster system activities, principals and teachers were left with double work to perform. One respondent argued that *"time was not sufficient for the principal to carry the duties of being an administrator for the school for which they were appointed as principal, for being the cluster centre principal and at the same time a teacher"* (T5). This was overload of work to a person and that time was not available to execute such multiple duties.

Three job titles attached to one person demanded a considerable amount of time and efforts to have successfully executed the mandate associated with each title. Principals were executing their role of being school principals for their schools, and secondly being teachers at their schools, and neglected the Cluster system activities. The Cluster system activities were neglected, not only due to limited time, but also for the fact that the other two roles were the roles for which school principals were appointed and paid for.

### ***External limitations***

Apart from limitations internal to the education ministry such as resources availability, other stakeholders with an

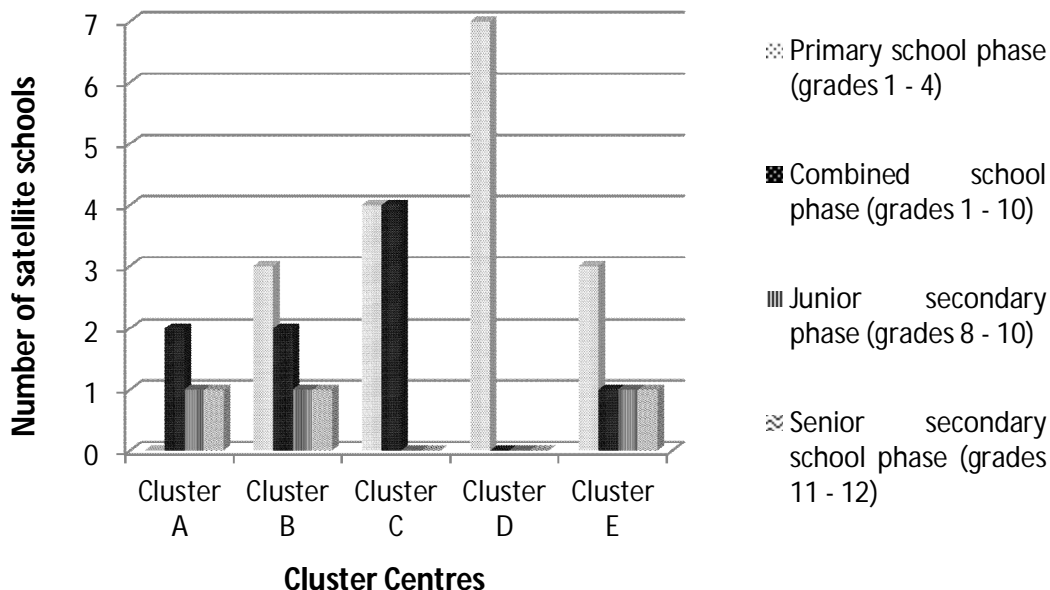


Figure 1. Cluster Centres and their satellite schools in Circuit 1.

interest in education also exerted force with an impact on the School Cluster System. The Namibia National Teachers Union (NANTU), has been against the School Cluster System, having termed it as the exploitation of teachers and principals, who were its membership base. The union argued that its memberships were ordered to perform cluster activities without rewards and recognition in return. The union has been vocal in advocating for the gazetting of the School Cluster System, wherein principals and teachers would then reap benefits.

The position of the union placed teachers and principals in a back and forth scenario, because *“being between two bosses, one is confused. NANTU is saying this and the Permanent Secretary of the Ministry of education is saying that. One does not know where to go”* (T20). Being indecisive about what to do due to contradicting directives, was what caused a stalemate in the operation of School Cluster System. This research revealed that the School Cluster System operated in an exploitative manner, wherein principals and teachers executed cluster activities without recognition and rewards. This was the basis of the union’s arguments and *“instructed its members (principals and teachers) to stop performing any school cluster related activities since there was no reward for performing such additional work”* (T25).

If the bureaucracy involved in getting the School Cluster System legalised were presumed lengthy and the benefits established during piloting were not to be foregone, then appropriate interventions in the form of incentives could have been provided to principals and teachers in the meantime. Such incentives would have

motivated teachers and principals to take up the extra work related to Cluster activities. This would have helped improving the effectiveness of School Cluster System. The poorly performing School Cluster System could be solved by *“addressing incentives for CCPs, provision of resources for cluster system activities and legalising the system. I am sure if these are in place, then the bottle necks will be totally done away with”* (T8). Henceforth, teachers and principals would have been motivated had they been provided with all the essentials they needed to implement school Cluster activities, and given rewards for performing such activities.

#### **Lack of understanding about school cluster system**

Even though the majority of the teachers and school principals possessed a thorough understanding of what School Cluster System was, the system was not well understood by some stakeholders. There was a lack of understanding about cluster systems and its operation among the various stakeholders, especially beginner teachers and parents’ community. This explains why there was a poor involvement of new teachers and parents in school activities. *“Teachers and parents did not have any idea of what School Cluster System was all about, even though some principals received training”* (T2). Some teachers have just entered the teaching profession and some teachers have just recently assumed principal positions and were not clear of what cluster system was all about. This made it difficult for them to have executed cluster system activities in the



absence of clear directions, requisite skills and required training. Therefore, *“it was only by way of implementing cluster system training especially to new recruits, that stakeholders could have known their responsibilities better, and performed cluster activities to a desired level”* (T21).

## TRUSTWORTHINESS OF FINDINGS

For the trustworthiness of the research findings, the researcher employed the following methods.

### Triangulation

Various scholars have defined triangulation as the use of multiple methods to data collection in order to enable these methods to complement each other and to confirm that the data present common answers (Kahn and Best, 2006; Creswell, 2014; Leedy and Omrod, 2005). According to Guba (1981), the use of different methods in a study, compensates for their individual limitations and exploits their respective benefits. This study employed data triangulation as one of the types of triangulation.

Data triangulation involves using different sources of information in order to increase the trustworthiness of the findings of the study (Creswell, 2014). It involves using different sources of research instruments, such as interviews, focus group discussions or participant observation that utilises different informants to enhance the quality of the data (Anney, 2014). In this study, the researcher has used different data collection methods, which included questionnaires, focus group interviews and document analysis, administered to different informants. These multiple methods all produced data that complemented each other in addressing the research intentions (Leedy and Omrod, 2005).

### Member checking

Member checking seeks to establish whether the participants agree with what the researcher have written about the data they provided during the inquiry (Ary et al., 2010). Member checking requires that the data interpretations and discussions are continuously tested as they are derived, with participants from whom the data was solicited (Guba, 1981). The aim for adopting this method helped the researcher solicits feedback and shared the interpretations of the data with the participants which helped clear up miscommunication, identified inaccuracies and helped obtain additional useful data. The researcher went back to the participants and shared the interpretations and discussion of the findings with them. This was meant to establish common grounds on

the research outcomes with participants. This iterative process ensured that the findings were true facts and genuine reflections of the data collected from the participants.

## CONCLUSION

School Cluster System is a new trajectory in the decentralisation of educational functions from central governments to local levels, especially in an African context where most schools are located in desolated rural area and have difficulties in accessing resources and services to effect successful teaching and optimal learning. Different countries have embraced this dispensation of education reform and have devolved their educational functions to local levels in order to involve the local people in the administration and management of education in their areas, thereby improving efficiency and effectiveness.

This study argues that School Cluster System remains helpful to schools located in rural areas as their mobility to access resources and services were often negated by desolated rural area conditions. Bringing the required services to Cluster Centres implied that other schools (satellite schools) have more access to resources close to them which then results in a great deal of time saved for teaching and learning and reduced travelling costs and distance. Sharing of expertise, instructional resources and frequent contacts by members of a cluster centre, did not only promote social cohesion and interaction, but also promote teaching and learning processes.

Despite the benefits of School Cluster System, the results of its implementation bears mixed feelings and uncertainty, which brought its viability and sustainability into question. The system did not operate as expected, caused by deficiencies in its design, implementation, monitoring and evaluation. This necessitated for empirical inquiries to discover challenges associated with the system implementation, and suggest improvements so that the system yields expected outcomes.

This study was largely prompted by the fact that schools were operating in isolation and there was little evidence to prove the existence of School Cluster System. The study sought to discover the challenges that underlie the implementation of School Cluster System, with the aim of providing considerate and measured solutions by way of recommendations, on how the School Cluster System operations could be improved. A qualitative case study was used as a methodology for the study. A case study design was relevant as it have helped to provide rich narratives about the subject that was studied from the participants 'own point of view in their specific context.

The study found out that although the implementation

of School Cluster System was a positive milestone in improving teaching and learning by way of decentralised functions and sharing of resources, the full benefits of the system were far from being cherished. A number of factors were advanced. Firstly, the School Cluster System did not have a legal basis for operation, as it was not a component of the Namibian Education Act (Act 16 of 2001). Secondly, there was a lack of resources for the implementation of School Cluster System activities. Activities were planned, but there were no resources with which to execute them.

Thirdly, principals and teachers were not rewarded for executing cluster activities as extra duties. This has caused low morale on principals and teachers towards School Cluster System. Fourthly, while the poor functioning of the School Cluster System was attributed to insufficient operational resources and lack of staff motivation, it was observed that nothing was being done by the Ministry of education to address these issues. This has resulted in a stalemate state of affairs regarding School Cluster System activities.

This study recommended that the Ministry of education should pursue the legalisation of School Cluster System. This legal pursuit should focus on having the system gazetted as an Act of parliament on its own, or stress for the Education Act to be amended, and have School Cluster System component embedded in the Act, so that the system becomes legal. This would enable the system to be appropriated with resources for operations and become a long-term viable and sustainable educational improvement milestone.

Pending the legalisation of the School Cluster System, it was recommended that the Ministry of education should make efforts to motivate principals and teachers in order to carry out cluster system activities more effectively. This could be done by providing rewards to teachers and principals. CCPs should also be offered remuneration for acting as Inspector of Education. This will eradicate the exploitative view of the system by teachers and principals. To ensure relevance and keep abreast with best practices and contemporary policy frameworks, further research should be conducted on a periodic basis, about School Cluster System operations in order to establish the system effectiveness thereon, and identify areas of further improvement.

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**Citation :** Shikalepo, E. E. (2018). School cluster system for quality education in rural Namibian schools. *African Educational Research Journal*, 6(2): 48-57.

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