

# Benefits and challenges of a teacher cluster in South Africa: The case of Sizabantwana

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*This article explores teacher clusters as possible mechanisms for teacher development in dealing with a number of the difficulties facing education in the South African context. It describes the benefits and challenges experienced by primary school teachers who are involved in a self-sustaining teacher cluster (development and support group). This cluster is unique in that it focuses on psychosocial issues confronting the teachers in their classrooms. The study uses an interpretive qualitative approach to report on the experiences of the members of the cluster in an attempt to extract some lessons that may be useful to practitioners in the South African context. This study highlights the value of using a long-term developmental and organic approach to develop a community of practice for teacher support and development.*

**Keywords:** Teacher cluster, psychosocial support, community of practice, Afrocentric approach

## Introduction

Recent articles by Jita and colleagues (2009; 2012) prompted this article, which aims to describe a teacher cluster in KwaZulu-Natal called Sizabantwana<sup>1</sup> (in *isiZulu* 'Helping children'). Jita and Ndjalane (2009) report on the effectiveness of teacher clusters in the professional development of mathematics and science teachers, and Jita and Mokhele (2012) describe the challenges of institutionalising such clusters.

Sizabantwana differs from other clusters due to its focus on psychosocial issues within the school context and not on a particular subject area. Since the cluster was developed following a community psychology approach, the lessons learned during its 15 years' existence may have broader application and offer an alternative approach to teacher development, particularly for those interested in the challenges of inclusive education.

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From the outset, the development team (consisting of two psychologists and two pioneer educators) conceptualised Sizabantwana as an educator development project, with the primary aim of developing teachers' capacity to deal with children's psychosocial issues. Given the contested domains of 'teacher development', 'teacher learning' and 'professional development' (Evans, 2002; Fraser, Kennedy, Reid & McKinney, 2007), this form of professional development most closely resembles Day's (1999: 4) description: "... alone and with others, teachers review, renew and extend their commitment as change agents to the moral purposes of teaching; and by which they acquire and develop critically the knowledge, skills, planning and practice with children, young people and colleagues". The challenges of the South African education context, outlined below, necessitate an innovative, locally relevant approach to teacher development.

## **Background to this study: The Sizabantwana group**

In 1997, two teachers from township schools approached a university's applied psychology unit for assistance, because learners in their classrooms required assessment and intervention. Given the extent of the challenges faced by these teachers and the lack of services available to their schools and learners, an alternative community psychology model for intervention was developed and has been in operation ever since.

The Sizabantwana project aims to develop educator capacity to deal with psychosocial issues in their school communities. The intention is that these teachers should become agents of change in their contexts, and be identified as resources by other community members. The model thus developed centres on the following principles: respect for the capacity and agency of teachers; respect for the local knowledge of teachers as community members (teachers are experts of their own situation), and the belief that people are able to generate their own solutions. There simply were, and still are, no resources available to adequately attend to these children's psychosocial (and other) needs. Regarding teachers as resources provides a way forward. In addition, establishing a community of practice is consistent with the teachers' cultural values which, following an African philosophical approach, emphasise collectivism and a communal perspective (Mkhize, 2004).

A group support model was thus developed and launched, in which teachers from the same geographic area would meet in a cluster and offer each other support. At these fortnightly meetings, workshops were held about a particular problem area identified by the teachers (for example, HIV, discipline), with the aim of facilitating discussions about what could realistically be done in each of their schools. Subsequent meetings continued with this approach, with teachers discussing and supporting each other concerning issues of implementation.

As the cluster progressed, the initial volunteers encouraged other teachers to join, and thus the project grew substantially to now include 37 member schools. Schools are represented by at least one educator (a volunteer) who attends the meetings.

There is a natural process of attrition and new membership; hence, schools join and leave the cluster over time. However, many of the currently participating schools have been involved since the cluster's inception.

From the outset, a developmental plan was established to deal with issues of sustainability. While the project was initially driven by the psychologists, as the programme evolved, this leadership role devolved to the group members. A group member assumes the leadership role for five years, while simultaneously mentoring his/her successor. Thus, issues of sustainability are managed, with both the original psychologist and the former lead educator available to assist where required.

The Sizabantwana group meets fortnightly. Although there is a focus on content, the by-product of this support process has been the development of leadership in the teachers themselves. Thus, during a meeting, the group may be focusing on 'inclusive education', while simultaneously being involved with spearheading other initiatives at their schools. These range from developing vegetable gardens to referring an abused child to the appropriate authorities. The project develops and supports these skills. The current study aims to investigate teachers' experiences of this teacher cluster, which appears to have capacitated teachers to be pro-active agents of change for their communities.

## **Educational context in South Africa**

Moon (2007) describes the school-based teacher development context, arguing that the Millennium Development Goal of 'Education for All' by 2015 will not succeed without extensive investment in teacher professional development. However, he acknowledges that few efforts to improve teacher development "are situated in the developing world. Few are driven by the real agendas of the poor and the dispossessed" (Moon, 2007: 369).

Since the end of apartheid, the South African government has increased education expenditure to supply disadvantaged schools with necessary equipment and resources. In addition, the educator rationalisation initiative attempted to improve the pupil-to-teacher ratio in poor schools. However, Jansen and Taylor (2003) argue that there is a wide implementation gap between policy and practice.

In a recent report of educators' perceptions of education in South Africa, Matoti (2010) found that the stresses experienced by teachers mirrored the wider social and political contexts in South Africa, resulting in fear and uncertainty. He argues for the creation of communities of practice, so that educators do not "suffer quietly" (Matoti, 2010: 582). Teacher clusters are one possible way to create these communities of practice.

## Research on teacher networks

Lieberman and McLaughlin (1992) describe the power and potential pitfalls of teacher networks. They report that networks can be powerful for teacher development when they are driven by the educators' agendas; provide opportunities for shared vision and learning, and have mechanisms for the development of stability and appropriate leadership. However, networks may be problematic when issues of quality and application are not addressed, or when ownership and decisions regarding goals and objectives become disputed. Despite these guidelines and possible areas of enquiry, provided 20 years ago, research into teacher networks or clusters remains limited.

Jita and Mokhele (2012) and Jita and Ndlalane (2009) review the evidence about teacher clusters and conclude that little is documented about how these structures serve to develop teachers. Whilst acknowledging the lack of research into links between teachers' participation in networks and changed classroom practice, Niesz (2007) argues for their development based on the notions of communities of practice. Lima (2010) argues that networks have grown mainly as a result of 'faith or fads' and not on the basis of sufficient evidence of effectiveness.

Niesz (2007) claims that traditional approaches to professional development do not recognise the time and support required to inspire changes in practice, whereas teacher networks have the potential to work through various mechanisms, namely creating a community of belonging; providing a "context of dignity and respect that teachers do not always experience" (Niesz, 2007: 608), and providing legitimacy for ideas, actions and advocacy. Maistry (2008: 131) also argues for teacher development through communities of practice, but cautions that South African conditions require the move beyond Wenger's (1998) model of communities of practice to include the input of an expert other.

Lima (2010) proposes a number of dimensions for understanding networks, including their *genesis* and *interactional* aspects. The reasons for the creation of the network and participants' motivations for joining are important for a sense of ownership of the group. Lima (2010) notes that networks are often externally sponsored or that participants are coerced into joining. He argues that face-to-face interaction helps to develop trust, which allows for deeper relating. However, some participants in the study reported difficulties with colleagues when they tried to share their learning in their work contexts.

Jita and Ndlalane's (2009) study mentions that the majority of teachers work in isolation with little opportunity for sharing practices and experiences. The teacher cluster in their study was able to break down some of the barriers to collaboration, which included feelings of isolation, an absence of professional identity, and "the lack of trust and suspicion displayed by other colleagues" (Jita & Ndlalane, 2009: 63). Critical success factors in the teacher cluster included the sense of collegiality that developed; ownership of the process and participation as peers, and a sense of resourcefulness within the group. They caution that developing trust and overcoming

the fear of opening up goes beyond structural adjustments and is a process requiring personal change. They warn against “‘contrived collegiality’, where teachers come together as a bureaucratic requirement rather than for their own benefit and growth” (Jita & Ndjalane, 2009: 66).

## **Community psychology**

The principles of community psychology informed the development of the Sizabantwana group. Community psychology can be practised in different ways (Fryer & Laing, 2008), from mainstream initiatives, which do little to challenge the status quo, to radical approaches, which appear more political than psychological. The most appropriate approach depends on resources, context and the community-psychologist ‘fit’ (Dunbar-Krige, Pillay & Henning, 2010).

For Sizabantwana, the values of community psychology described by Nel, Lazarus and Daniels (2010) are pertinent, where the role of the psychologist extends beyond micro-level interventions, to ensure widespread delivery of mental health services, particularly to previously (and currently) under-served groups. This particular approach considers and respects local knowledge and attempts to foster personal and political empowerment. It aims to embrace diversity and develop a sense of community. Given the context of education in South Africa, and the lack of services available to children in most disadvantaged schools, it is important to conceptualise psychosocial problems (and their solutions) from a systemic perspective, focusing on preventative and health-promoting interventions.

This particular approach to community psychology also aims to facilitate community participation and inter-sectoral collaboration. One of the main aims is to address exclusion and oppression through transformative interventions, rather than perpetuating the status quo through amelioration (Fryer & Laing, 2008). In the South African context and in education and schools, in particular, these aims remain challenging. Sizabantwana is thus an attempt to work beyond the level of individual children with difficulties, to effect transformation in schools through educators as change agents.

The principles of community psychology practised in the development of the group are consistent with an Afrocentric world view that is collectivist rather than individualistic and that recognises that all life is interconnected and extends beyond the immediate physical realm (Mkhize, 2004). Mkhize (2004: 46) explains that “a sense of community exists if people mutually recognise the obligation to be responsive to one another’s needs”. The Sizabantwana group is, therefore, an attempt to develop an African community of practice in the South African context.

## **Methodology**

A qualitative interpretive research design was employed to investigate the participants’ perceptions and experiences of the Sizabantwana group. As the interpretive approach

privileges participants' experiences, this allowed the researchers to develop a better understanding of the meanings, opinions, perceptions and experiences of the teachers who are involved (Terre Blanche, Durrheim & Kelly, 2006).

Ethical procedures were adhered to in the research. The Sizabantwana group were approached at a group meeting where the research was explained and participants volunteered. Only those who had been with the group for at least one year were included. Informed consent, anonymity, and confidentiality were negotiated at the start of the interviews, as was the possibility of publication/dissemination of the results.

This study used purposive sampling (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2000) to select a sample of eight Black female teachers employed at township and rural schools in Anonymous Town and the neighbouring areas. Table 1 provides details of the sample.

**Table 1: Details of the research participants**

<i>Participant</i>	<i>No. of years teaching (as at 2010)</i>	<i>No. of years in Sizabantwana (as at 2010)</i>	<i>Quintile rank of school<sup>2</sup></i>	<i>Estimated number of pupils enrolled at school (as at 2010)</i>
1	15	14	4	1.400
2	14	>10	3	1.050
3	19	7	2	600
4	32	>10	4	500
5	27	6	4	1.157
6	16	1	3	700
7	14	4	3	700
8	8	4	3	770

Data was collected via semi-structured interviews, which were approximately an hour in length. The interviewer asked open-ended questions about the teaching context; the role and function of Sizabantwana, and the benefits and challenges of being part of the group. These interviews were recorded and transcribed. Thematic analysis was used to analyse the data (Braun & Clarke, 2005).

The trustworthiness of the data was enhanced, with the two researchers conferring over the themes emerging from the data, and recording a detailed description of the research process, including the context of the research. As this was a small qualitative sample, the researchers aimed for transferability of findings rather than generalisability.

## **Results**

The themes that emerged from the interviews centred on three core issues: the difficulties experienced by teachers in the current educational context; their experiences of being part of the Sizabantwana group, and the challenges and rewards of being in the cluster.

### **Difficulties experienced by teachers in their contexts**

Although not the focus of the study, the difficulties described by the teachers provide the context in which the Sizabantwana cluster emerged. The majority of their learners come from impoverished socioeconomic circumstances; as one participant stated, “We have starving children at our school”. In addition, the schools are characterised by a lack of resources; one teacher explained, “The classrooms were very packed. Maybe a teacher has 65/70 [learners] in a class”. Many teachers struggle with a lack of parental involvement and poor relationships between various stakeholders: “You try to consult the parents, they just ignore or they not up to it because they don’t see a problem”. Lastly, the participants mentioned their difficulties with the Department of Education (DoE) and policy issues: “They impose to educators without involving them”.

### **District-initiated professional development programmes**

The participants acknowledged that, whereas some DoE-driven development programmes are helpful, there were a number of criticisms. They reported structures that had been set up in schools without proper training of those who were required to run them: “The Department introduced the TSTs, Teacher Support Teams. But they never really trained the teachers”. They also reported time-limited workshops where teachers were expected to gain and implement skills: “If there’s the teacher development, not just to go for 2 days, 1 or 2 days, or 4 days workshop and then you just expect the educators to go and implement. Ah, ah, it doesn’t work that way because the time is too limited, too short”. In addition, they reported feeling intimidated at DoE-based workshops: “We are having a workshop and when the officials are around, you feel threatened to speak your mind. Because maybe you will be targeted”.

### **Experiences of the Sizabantwana group**

The participants reported benefits for the teachers themselves, the children they teach, the families of the children and the communities in which they work. There were, however, also challenges to being part of the cluster, both within their schools and in the broader community.

## Benefits for teachers

One of the benefits reported by the participants was exposure to new information and learning which promoted their understanding of their learners: “It makes us understand some of the problems that our children have”. Participants highlighted gaining information from multiple sources, not only the DoE, and access to specific resources. One participant stated, “I found out that they [Sizabantwana] open doors, like the other doctors’ sections”, in reference to the referral system set up with the paediatric departments at the state hospitals, where children from Sizabantwana schools are assessed and assisted.

The information shared at cluster meetings also extended beyond classroom-based issues to topics pertinent to the teachers’ personal development: “They also had um someone from bank K; she came to talk to us about how to start your own companies”. In addition, one participant mentioned, “If we can’t sort that problem, we call for an expert to come in”, demonstrating awareness of their own resourcefulness (“we can solve problems”) and of the need for expert intervention and assistance (“call for an expert”).

Many of the participants referred to the support and belonging they experienced, with one participant referring to the cluster as: “the way we sharing our problems, our experiences, in this fraternity ...”. This sharing and support facilitated problem-solving and relief: “As we sit together as a group and discuss those problems, it becomes easier”. One participant went further, noting how the group provides an advocacy function: “We get to share ideas of how to deal with the situations that we are faced with in our schools ... We can use Sizabantwana as the voice”. For another participant, the support in the group extended further: “We do so much. We have spiritual [pause] discussions, we discuss the Bible, we discuss anything”. It has become standard practice for the group to open meetings with prayer and song.

It appeared that the sense of belonging to a community went beyond a superficial experience of support, with many participants making reference to stronger bonds, for example: “We are like sisters now”; “It’s a Sizabantwana family”; “Sizabantwana is a home”. These bonds may have been promoted in part by an annual retreat on Women’s Day, as one participant noted: “We comfort each other and once a year we go out to chillax”. Since everyone in the group is a volunteer, the annual retreat (a night away) is offered as recognition for the work that the group members do during the year. A sense of trust has developed between the group members: “Even our family problems, we talk about them. Ja, we, we trust each other”.

Several participants mentioned a further benefit of belonging to the cluster, namely their perceived sense of personal development: “Even personally, we’ve grown”; explaining, “... then I, so have acquired that confidence to stand in front of people and address them”. Another participant stated, “We are helping one another to develop academically, financially, emotionally and even spiritually”. This illustrates the sense of ownership and agency that has developed.

## **Benefits for learners**

The participants reported on the various ways in which children at their schools had benefited from the initiative. Teachers' improved networking skills had led to donations, for example: "We've been able to acquire donations. We had a sports day for the foundation [phase] for the first time". Through a partnership with an Australian doll-making group, many children received dolls as comfort objects; one participant reported, "We have kids here who are affected and infected, so let us make them feel that they are a part of us, they are not discriminated against. So we used those dollies to give to them".

Through the referral system to the hospital, children with eyesight and other medical problems have received assistance: "Most of the children are getting their glasses now and the problem is solved"; "Sizabantwana has granted us permission to refer learners who are sick, who have learning problems". Group members have also participated in training in child participation, for example, "They did also expose us with one of the aspects like empowering learners to voice out ... And how to attack problems in their community".

## **Broader impact**

According to the participants, the benefits extended beyond the school into the broader community. Children are able to access grants as a result of the group's activities: "So the child now is receiving grant". Schools have accessed feeding schemes, which sometimes extend to the children's families: "I also help the parent to get some food". In addition, parents are being encouraged to participate and cooperate with the schools: "We even call the parents to the meetings and make them aware". The cluster also enabled networking with other organisations and sectors: "The networking scope is widened. It has gone bigger and bigger". This includes general networking ("We can write a letter, take it somewhere, maybe to a business, a company and request for sponsorship") and relationships with specific services: "They've got a, eh, teachers there who are good in remedial work. So they've been visiting our school for remedial work to children".

## **Challenges from the school**

Some participants reported that not all school principals willingly allow their staff to attend Sizabantwana meetings: "So, some of the teachers have stopped to come to Sizabantwana because of their principals". In addition, teachers face competing demands on their time – their commitments at school sometimes conflict with their commitment to the cluster: "Attendance is not good because maybe at that time that particular member has to be somewhere else".

## **Challenges from families and communities**

Sometimes the interventions that are promoted by Sizabantwana are not welcomed by families who appear to fear stigma and marginalisation: "You will be collected by

the car and everybody sees that the child is attending a special school. They don't want to be er, identified like that". This is especially problematic in instances of child abuse, as one participant related, "The family was angry with the teacher ... Plus sometimes they want to protect the breadwinner". As a result, parents sometimes remain uncooperative, or in denial, and the child remains unattended to; one participant emphasised that it is difficult "dealing with a parent that doesn't want to accept the problem".

One of the main challenges facing the group is the scale of the problems that require intervention. The nature of the cluster is such that only a limited number of issues can be addressed at any one time. As one participant stated, "Sometimes it's a drop in the ocean, because we've got so many learners that have got problems, especially learning problems".

## Discussion

This study investigated teachers' experiences of being involved in a cluster. The participants indicated that they have benefited from the group in a variety of ways, including opportunities to learn and implement new information and skills; networking and referral; support and problem-solving; advocacy; personal development, and a sense of belonging. The Sizabantwana group attempted to empower teachers and equip them with the necessary skills and support to address important challenges in their schools.

The participants' experiences in their school environments echo the difficulties reported by others (Matoti, 2010). The Sizabantwana members struggled in contexts of poverty with few resources available for intervention. In addition, they cited difficulties with both Departmental decrees and decisions and traditional teacher development workshops which were imposed by externally driven agendas and coerced participation (Lima, 2010).

The community of practice that has developed took time and social support in order to be effective (Maistry, 2008; Niesz, 2007), but it appears to have yielded many benefits. The participants highlighted social support as a primary benefit of belonging. The face-to-face interaction that developed trust and deep relating (Lima, 2010) was apparent in the participants' responses in respect of "sharing problems" and "comforting each other". In addition, the participants indicated a deep sense of belonging (Jita & Ndjalane, 2009) and solidarity that went beyond collegiality. The participants came to rely on each other for problem-solving advice and assistance, enhancing their resourcefulness. The participants also recognised when they required expert assistance (Maistry, 2008).

The network was created at the request of the teachers (Lieberman & McLaughlin, 1992; Lima, 2010); it was an initiative that was independent of the DoE, and has not been institutionalised (Jita & Mokhele, 2012). The Sizabantwana cluster members are all volunteers. It appears that there was no coercion or imposed membership

of the group. This resulted in a sense of ownership contributing to its sustainability (participants often used the term 'we' when talking about the group).

The Sizabantwana experience confirms the potential of teacher networks (Lieberman & McLaughlin, 1992). This cluster, with its focus on psychosocial issues, was able to mobilise services and resources for children: they accessed grants, food, medical care and donations. They were also referred for treatment and to more appropriate educational placements. This may be an outcome unique to this kind of cluster. The cluster approach may, therefore, offer great opportunities for these kinds of issues.

In addition, Lieberman and McLaughlin (1992) argue for the need for good cluster leadership. For Sizabantwana, this has been addressed through the notion of a five-year leadership term and through a mentoring process for the incoming leader. This long-term developmental approach is consistent with community psychology principles of recognising local knowledge and promoting these within the community in question.

The participants' experiences in this teacher cluster highlight the potential for this kind of intervention in the South African context. In particular, an Afrocentric approach was useful in embracing a spiritual dimension to the group which appears to make it more meaningful to the group members.

However, Lima (2010) and Lieberman and McLaughlin (1992) warn that there is a 'dark side' to teacher clusters. Some of the participants reported difficulties in their school and broader communities. Being part of this initiative is, therefore, not without costs. In some instances, the school management appeared to be threatened by the development of the teachers (both in terms of their improved skills to deal with issues at schools and their personal empowerment) and denied them permission to attend. They may have feared that the innovations which the teachers attempted to bring back to their schools may have exposed problematic practices and were, therefore, unwelcome. Concerned about issues of territory, DoE officials attempted to discredit the cluster. At one point, a DoE official attempted to sabotage the group, and teachers were afraid to attend, as they believed that the group did not have departmental approval. Some children's parents have been unreceptive to the interventions proposed at cluster meetings and teachers have struggled with resistance, sometimes even threats, or have been blamed. Another challenge was the overwhelming demands of the context such that what can be done may have appeared insufficient and inadequate in the light of what was needed. This may have resulted in group members experiencing frustration at the lack of progress.

On the whole, the Sizabantwana group, therefore, seems to have been beneficial to its members in various ways. Although it is a small, local initiative, there are useful lessons for others wishing to attempt this form of teacher support and development. These are highlighted below, following an explanation of the potential limitations of this study.

## Limitations

The design of this study is not sufficient to provide strong evidence for the effectiveness of teacher clusters. However, the fact that the Sizabantwana group is still in existence 15 years since its inception, and that it continues to grow in teacher and school participation, suggests that it is serving some important functions. In addition, in the absence of a control group, it cannot be concluded that the benefits recorded are a result of the teacher cluster and not some other, broader developmental process. As this is a qualitative study, the participants' experiences and perceptions have been privileged. A further limitation is that one of the researchers who conducted the interviews was from the Anonymous University's School of Psychology. Although he was not directly involved with the group, his institutional affiliation (the primary strategic partner of the teachers) meant that socially desirable responses may have been given. A researcher who was perceived as more neutral may have elicited more critical responses.

## Conclusion

Despite these limitations, this article attempted to document some of the benefits and challenges of teacher clusters in the South African context. To respond to Moon's (2007) concern that these kinds of interventions are seldom driven by the agendas of the poor, this *is* an initiative from the developing world, drawing on some of the unique strengths of our context and culture. The following key lessons may be helpful to others working in this field. Teacher clusters *can* work and are more likely to succeed if they are conceptualised as long-term, developmental and organic clusters that will flourish in a context of respect, relationship and trust. The culture and values of the cluster members must guide the approach in the group. The developments in the group members and the goals of the group may not be welcomed by outside parties, often in authority, and group members need support (from one another) in order to persevere. Finally, in launching such a group, one should recognise that successes will be limited in the light of the overwhelming task that is required, but it is also important to celebrate those small successes.

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## Endnotes

- i. The name was chosen by the group members.
- ii. Quintiles are ranked with 1 being poorest and 5 being the least poor. Schools that are declared as quintiles 1, 2 and 3 are “no fee” schools.