CaRE Clusters Handbook

Project: CaRE – developing collaborative and reflective environments in schools.

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Primary Authors:

Context

Schools can all benefit from sharing their knowledge, experience and resources by working together.

Hill (2007) reasoned that there is a robust intellectual case for schools to work collaboratively. He proclaimed that lateral learning, applied in a disciplined way, is the key to school improvement: 'Collaboration is a key part of the jigsaw in helping to ensure that good ideas and excellent practice don't get "trapped on location" but travel laterally (and vertically) to improve the quality of education provision being offered to each and every student.' (Hill 2007)

By the same token Collarbone and West-Burnham (2008) conclude that the need is to move beyond internal school 'bonding' within the institution to external school 'bridging' in collaboration with others:

'For a community to thrive it is necessary to bond and bridge. Bridging involves becoming inclusive, interdependent and heterogeneous. In many ways the traditional focus of school leadership has been on bonding; systems leadership requires a movement to bridging.'

West-Burnham (2009) further analysed bridging models as:

- networks
- clusters
- partnerships

Hargreaves (2010) states that: most schools have gained experience of working in partnerships and networks of many kinds. Increased decentralisation offers an opportunity to build on these and become self-improving.

Clusters

Clusters, according to Chikoko (2007) are the grouping of schools within the same geographical location aiming to improve the quality and relevance of the education in the schools. Turkey (2004) defines school clusters as a tool that schools can use to promote collaboration, reflection, sharing and learning among the teaching fraternity.

The purpose of school cluster system according to the Basic Education System Overhaul (BESO) (2002-2007) is for teacher development because clusters support teacher capacity to teach effectively according to the new active learning based curriculum. A Cluster system could serve as an innovative network to support, promote and inspire teacher development leading to quality education

Role of Management in Establishing a Cluster

West- Burhnam (2009) state that the support of school management is crucial in the formation and sustenance of a cluster.

For school leaders to buy into the clusters model, they require stimuli. The University of Manchester (2008) found that there seem to be three important stimuli for change: local dissatisfaction with current arrangements and/or opportunities for improvement; individual drive and vision at school level; and significant local acts of philanthropy.

Similarly, Smith (2009), in her National College practitioner research project, looked at how such collaborations could be built so as to be sustainable. Open-mindedness to both the benefits and potential for development seemed to be the key: 'Open-mindedness, combined with a sense of pursuing one's own school needs, seemed the cornerstone of sustainable collaboration, with school leaders feeling protection for their individual schools but a willingness to consider changes adopted from elsewhere.'

Characteristics of a Successful Cluster

Mendelsohn and Ward (2001) give a guide as to what a school cluster should look like in practice:

- School clusters is a group of schools that are geographically as close and accessible to each other as possible.
- Each cluster normally consists of between five and seven schools with a number of representatives from each school.
- One school in each group is selected to serve as the cluster centre.
- The cluster centre is central and accessible as possible to its satellite schools.
- The centre has adequate facilities and ideally situated at a development centre where other social and commercial services are available.

How to group? → **How often to meet?** → **Who facilitates?** → **How to support?** → **How to decide content?**

Cameron & Gibson (2001) suggest that one of the best ways to approach the formation of a cluster is a model of establishing microeconomic communities using teachers as major resources. Teachers become key assets in partnering up and working together to generate ideas and turning ideas into reality. In an ideal world, teachers are grouped with others who share common goals.

Fuller (1969) identified the three stages of cluster development. The diagram below conceptualises these stages:

Figure 1. A simplified model of clustering showing parallel processes of cluster development and teacher development.
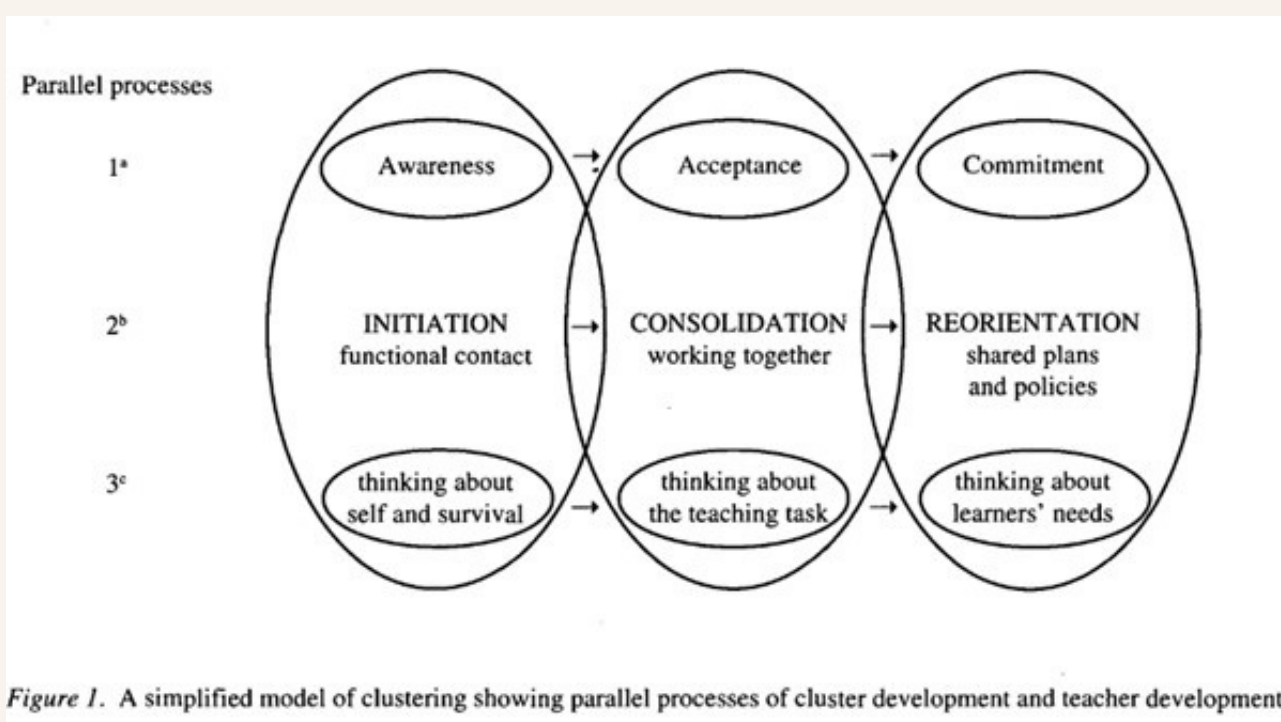
Stage 1 of the cluster development involves initiation i.e. teachers coming together.

Stage 2 of cluster development teachers are concerned with the acquisition of benefits from the cluster.

Stage 3 of cluster development teachers are committed to the cluster and are as likely to consider cluster needs as well as their own schools' needs.

Cluster Meetings

Jacobs (2015) states that cluster meetings should be organised monthly or at least three times per term. In order to prepare for these cluster meetings, meetings need to occur at school level to enable sustained and purposeful reflection. Jacobs (2015) declares that these school level meetings must form a fundamental part of a teacher's time timetable and must be supported by school management.

Maryam (2022) communicates her opinion on how clusters ought to be facilitated. She declares that a facilitator should be appointed to oversee activities at the cluster level. Maryam also specifies that each school participating in the cluster ought to have a primary facilitator for their individual in school meetings.

The facilitator helps make the group's work go smoothly; focus is on the group's process.

- Develops an agenda with input from the group and chairperson/leader
- Guides the group through the agenda
- Balances discussions so that participants have equal opportunity to participate
- Leads group activities such as brainstorming and multi voting
- Involves the group in summarizing decisions, actions and questions about each agenda item so that the group can move to the next item
- Confirms decisions made and affirms responsibility taken for action steps
- Sets the next meeting date
- Closes the meeting

In regards to the content covered during the cluster meetings, Mendelsohn and Ward (2001) believe that the topics must be mutually decided upon and have relevance to each participating school. With the intention that each school have both knowledge to impart and learning to take from the cluster meeting.

Other important roles to be fulfilled as part of cluster include:

A Timekeeper who will help the group make deliberate decisions about how it spends its limited meeting time:

- Alerts the group when it is getting close to the time limit set for each item
- Asks the group to decide whether it wants to continue the discussion or move on
- A Note taker – maintains a written record of the group's meeting
- Documents key decisions made, issues left unresolved, a summary of discussions, action items and responsibility taken
- Uses a standard, concise format Scribe – keeps a visual representation of the discussion in front of the group (using flip charts, white board or blackboard)
- Records brainstorming or other group process contributions
- Writes large and legibly

Hargreaves (2010) identified the particular benefits of working as a cluster:
- supporting new leaders
- protecting their members
- distributing innovation
- transferring professional knowledge more readily
- becoming more efficient in the use of resources

West- Burnham (2009) also identify a number short and long term of benefits of working as a cluster:

Short Term Benefits

- Clustering gives teachers and principal's opportunities to share their successes and challenges with each other.
- Participants learn in a supportive environment, where others are addressing similar challenges.
- School teachers, principals, and managers discuss and develop the roadmap for their own development and the development of their schools, thus increasing their ownership.

Long-Term Benefits

- Instils confidence among teachers and schools that they can expand their roles and work as trainers and resource persons for others.
- Develops a pool of "experts" in local areas.
- Speeds up the pace of success, as it inculcates healthy competition among schools within a cluster and among clusters within a region.
- Sustains impact by creating an internal resource team at each school and giving them the opportunity to practice their skills.

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Clusters – Case Study 1

Overview

Programme: Trinity Access: Schools of Distinction (SoD) through the CaRE programme. SoD aims to support the development of 'college-going' practices and student-centred, innovative learning environments across schools nationwide, particularly within schools where there is a low progression rate to post-secondary education.

Collaborators: Two secondary schools in the midlands area of Ireland. We will call these schools "School A" and "School B". We are not naming the schools due to GDPR guidelines. Both schools are under the patronage of their local Education and Training Board (ETB's). Both are co-educational and part of the Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools (DEIS) programme which aims to tackle educational disadvantage. Two teachers from each school formed this cluster.

Background

These case studies should be used once a teacher has read the Clusters Handbook. The handbook provides a deeper rationale into the development of clusters.

The Trinity Access: Schools of Distinction (SoD) aims to support the development of 'college-going' practices and student-centred, innovative learning environments across schools nationwide with low progression rates to higher education.

School A has been part of the SoD for the past 10 years or so while School B has just entered into the programme. Through the Collaborative and Reflective Environment (CaRE) Erasmus+ programme, we have liaised with each other to form a cluster. It is a collaborative approach where the two SoD teams work together to enhance our programmes in our respective schools. It will serve as a vehicle to facilitate collaboration between the two schools.

As School B is new to the programme, School A can support them as they embark on this new programme under the 3 SoD pillars of Leadership, Pathways to College, and Mentoring. It will also allow both schools to share best practices on how to implement the programme.

Through this collaborative approach, both schools can benefit from the practice of this programme but also use this as a guide to future initiatives that can be developed between the schools. It can also be extended to include other willing schools or by setting up new clusters for new initiatives.

Goals

1. To develop a cluster between the two schools
2. To collaborate on developing our SoD programmes
3. To collate resources/ideas that can be implemented in each school
4. To build leadership capacity between the collaborators
5. To develop networking between the two schools

The Innovative Approach

We established the cluster in Trinity College Dublin (TCD). From there we arranged a meeting between the two schools which also took place in TCD. Fuller (1969) identified this stage as Initiation, the first of 3 stages. This brings the teachers together and it was with the support of TCD, that this could be facilitated.

One of the critical components is the support from the senior management team in the two schools. Without the support of management – this would hinder the chances of success. Once that was granted, we could then move toward the implementation of the cluster. West – Burnham (2009) state that the support of the school managements is essential for a cluster to succeed.

The four teachers involved discussed the social and educational contexts of our schools and from there we could formulate a Schedule of Work that we could focus on. This is the second stage of Fuller's (1969) model where teachers need to work together for the process to flourish.

We created a shared folder on Google Drive that all persons could access. This is the third stage of Fuller's (1969) model – Reorientation. The sharing of material and policies will ensure that the best outcomes can be reached.

The Schedule of Work laid out the path that we would be taking. It was decided that in-person meetings were the preferred choice with some virtual meetings. The first two meetings were in-person, while the third meeting was virtual. The virtual platform we used was Google Meets as both parties are familiar with the practice. Other platforms could obviously be used depending on the members of the cluster.

The fourth was a site visit to School B as it helped portray the school context. This took place on a Tuesday afternoon as school timetabling meant the teachers in School A were free of classes.

Each meeting had a focus and that was decided in the email chat that was set up. Mentoring practices and Pathways to College were the focus of the first three meetings while the fourth meeting was centered around leadership. This focus for the meeting allows for a more productive environment.

A further 5th meeting is planned.

The 6th and final meeting is an evaluation of the cluster as well as to make plans for the next school year. The use of the evaluation is crucial for the success of the cluster as this is the first year of it so there may be teething issues and areas of improvement and development.

Results

Positives of the Cluster

- It has developed collaborative practice between the two schools – resources/ideas are being shared
- Our two schools are part of the ETB so that helps with continuity
- School B has developed their SoD programme with the support of School A. They have now linked into the Community Mentoring programme that School A is already part of.
- Site visits have taken place at both schools
- School B shared contacts from local business/entities who have visited School A to discuss options with our 6th Years.
- Resources have been shared and developed
- Mutual interests are being discussed and supported
- The leadership capacity of the 4 participants has developed
- Both managements are very impressed with the running of the cluster
- A joined-up Careers Fair with other schools in the ETB network in the region is envisaged for next year

Recommendations

- Ensure that management support the cluster
- Agree a clear plan for the cluster and have a timetable of meetings to structure the process.
- Seek active participation from all members

Resources

Trinity Access Programmes – School of Distinction

Fuller, F. (1969). Concerns of teachers: A developmental conceptualisation. American Educational Research Journal, 6, 207-226.

Clusters – Case Study 2

Overview

Programme: Leadership Cluster through Reflective Practice

Collaborators: Two secondary schools and one primary school in the midlands area of Ireland. We will call these secondary schools "School C" and "School D". We are not naming the schools due to GDPR guidelines. There was a total of 8 teachers involved in this cluster - three from each of the two secondary schools and two from the primary school.

Background

These case studies should be used once a teacher has read the Clusters Handbook. The handbook provides a deeper rationale into the development of clusters.

Both secondary schools are co-educational and have between 600 and 800 pupils each. One is part of the patronage of the local Educational and Training Board (ETB) and the other is a community school with a patronage of the Department of Education and Skills.

The primary school has roughly 150 pupils. The primary school is under the patronage of the Department of Education Skills and has an ethos of creating an environment where Christian values are fostered. Both secondary schools have links with the primary school as students from the primary schools attend both secondary schools. All 3 schools are co-educational.

It was through this link that the cluster was set up. Senior management teams from all three schools were supportive of this cluster and instrumental in setting it up. Interested teachers in each school were invited to put their names forward to take part in the cluster.

Goals

1. To develop a cluster between the three schools
2. To collaborate on developing Reflective Practices in the three schools
3. To build leadership capacity between all the collaborators
4. To support the primary school students with the transition to secondary school
5. To strengthen links with the primary school

The Innovative Approach

Fuller (1969) identifies the 3 stages of cluster development as being:

1. Initiation
2. Consolidation
3. Reorientation

The initiation stage of the cluster was set up by management in the first instance. They identified a need for collaboration between the schools in order to enhance the student experience. The transition between primary school and secondary school can be daunting for many pupils, so it was felt that this would help ease some of the worries that the pupils or parents may have.

Messaging was very important. Parents of the pupils in the primary school were informed of the practice that was taken place. A preliminary meeting took place in the primary school between the three managements of the schools as well as the teachers involved. A plan was then discussed and drawn up for the remainder of the school year.

One of the key components was the development of a resource that could be included in all tests carried out in the 3 schools. These can include class tests, end of term tests or mock examinations. It was based on reflective practice. Reflective practice is the ability to reflect on one's actions so the student can engage in the process of continuous learning. This manifested in the form of a variety of resources that the teachers could pick from such as "3 wishes and a star".

This could then facilitate continuous learning for the young person while also introducing the pupil to a common practice that is used in both secondary schools.

The cluster met regularly and it was always in-person. At the first meeting, it was established that online meetings would not support the creative and collaborative environment that was needed. This is the consolidation stage. Here the 8 teachers from the 3 different schools work together towards this common goal. They identify the benefits from the cluster and how to maximise the efficiency of the cluster.

In total, the participants met six times. Each meeting had an agenda that they wished to follow which was set up by the hosting school as all schools had two visits over the course of the school year.

In total, the participants met six times. Each meeting had an agenda that they wished to follow which was set up by the hosting school as all schools had two visits over the course of the school year.

A shared folder on Google Drive was invaluable to all participants. It also has a comments section where people could comment on resources that were prepared for the cluster. These would then be improved at the next meeting. This ties in with the third stage – reorientation. By sharing best practice and resources, the cluster is more likely to succeed and thrive.

Leadership capacity is often discussed in the educational world. This was an example of how a cluster can develop it. Teachers could opt to join the cluster which helps in the development of the cluster as well as for the individuals involved.

One crucial element was the evaluation session. This was the last session and a pre-prepared document was sent out to the pupils and the teachers for their feedback. This will prove to be very useful in developing this new cluster in the coming years.

Results
The cluster has been in existence for two years with the third year to be rolled out after February mid-term 2023.

Positives of the Cluster

- Enhanced leadership capacity among the participants
- Strengthened links between the primary and secondary schools
- Enhanced resources/continuity between the participants
- Reflective practice enhanced learning in all schools
- Senior management members were appreciative of the effort of the teachers
- Pupils who transitioned into secondary schools were more prepared
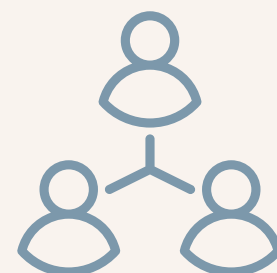
Recommendations

- Attract interested teachers - make staff more aware of the initiative
- Distribution of duties to be evenly divided
- Keep the core group small and committed
- Face to face meetings are far more beneficial

Resources

Fuller, F. (1969). Concerns of teachers: A developmental conceptualisation. American Educational Research Journal, 6, 207-226.